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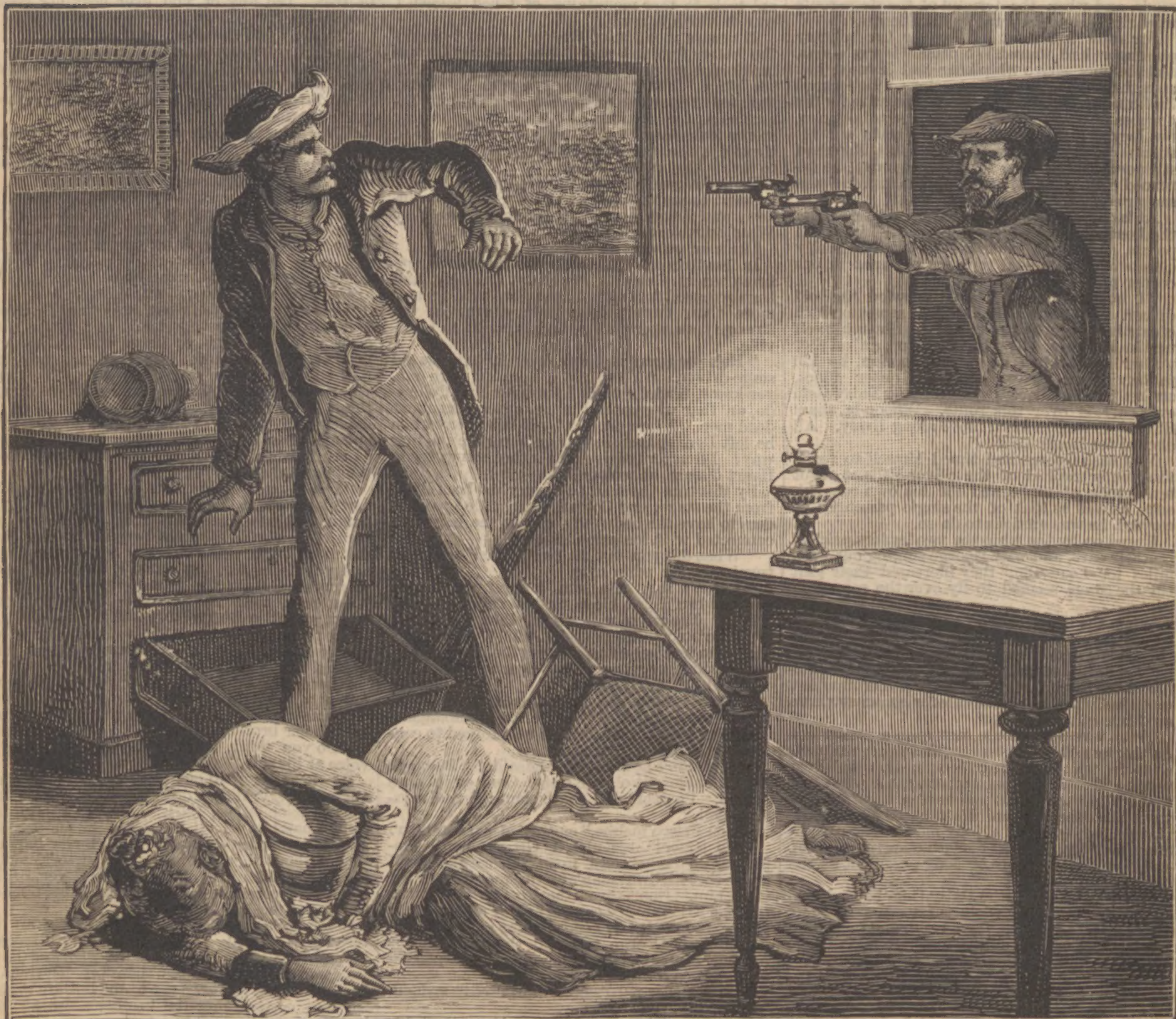
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No. 347

DENVER DUKE, THE MAN WITH "SAND;" Or, CENTIPEDE SAM'S LONE HAND.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,

AUTHOR OF "HERCULES GOLDSBUR," "BROAD-CLOTH BURT," "FLASH DAN," "COOL CONRAD," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"KEEP OFF, DENVER DUKE! YOU'RE A MAN WITH SAND BUT BY THE ETERNAL, I'LL PAINT THE WALLS WITH YOUR BRAINS, IF YOU
HELP THAT WOMAN. AND REMEMBER THAT IT IS DON FRISCO WHO SPEAKS!"

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OR,

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CHAPTER I.

THE DAISY GEM'S PASSENGER.

"TEN miles yet ter Leadville! Whoop-lal! Git a-lang, yer daisy prancers; whoop 'er up!" And the whip-cracks of the man on the box of the Denver-Leadville stage bowling over the mountain road resounded through the wild passes like the reports of a pistol.

Night it was, a clear starlit night in mid-summer, and the strongest wind abroad did not lift the whitened brim of the stage driver's big hat; it scarcely stirred the long hairs of his grizzled mustache. He cracked his whip over the four-in-hand that drew the old-fashioned coach over the winding road, and every now and then gave loud utterance to words similar to the ones just recorded.

Everybody in Colorado knew or had heard of Whiplash George, a veteran of wild West stage routes, and a man who boasted that he had never failed to land his passengers safe and sound at their destinations. And all this in a region where the road-agents' "stand an' delivers" were frequently heard, and where more than one driver had tumbled from his elevated perch at the crack of a revolver. The presence of Whiplash George on the box seemed sufficient for a safe journey, and the vehicle which he drove never wanted for passengers.

But, singular to relate, on the night that witnesses George's introduction to the reader, the stage Daisy Gem had but one passenger, a youngish man, well-dressed and handsome, with the bluest of eyes, and a rich, captivating voice. He had entered the stage at Denver booked for Leadville before the days of Colorado railroads, and when the termini of the stage-route were rivals, and desperately hard towns.

For some miles out of Denver the solitary passenger had shared Whiplash George's seat, and the inquisitive whip-king had learned just enough to render him very curious. He learned that his passenger was going to Leadville for the purpose of creating a sensation in certain circles, but beyond this point George, with all his adroit questionings, could not get. Repulsed whenever he reached forbidden ground, he returned to the attack, but always found his passenger equal to the occasion.

At last Whiplash George gave up in despair; the Leadville passenger had beaten him at all points, and George was relieved when he finally clambered down and took his old seat in one corner of the vehicle.

"I hope he'll stay thar," growled the old driver. "It'll be a mighty small sensation he'll create in Leadville, I'm thinkin'. Shuts himself up like an oyster when he wants ter, an' on ther t'other hand, when he takes a notion, he kin jabber like a parrot. Durned queer g'loot, strikes me; strangest passenger ther Daisy Gem ever carried over this route. Whoop-la, thar! Shake yer steppers and move along lively. All aboard fer Leadville!"

Whiplash George had timed himself to reach the young capital of the Silver Hills at about ten o'clock at night, and for his own convenience, as well as that of the single passenger he carried, he was anxious to do so.

Urged on by the whip the two leaders pricked up their ears, and with George singing out "ten miles ter Leadville!" they increased their gait till the stage seemed to fly over the mountain route.

When the lights of the Leadville cabins greeted the driver's eyes, he leaned over the side of the vehicle and shouted to the man below:

"Leadville in ther distance, boss! Ten minutes more an' I'll set yer down in ther dandiest town in Colorado. Leadville fer a man ov nerve an' bizness, bet yer life!"

There was no response, not even a movement on the part of the passenger, and George returned to the task of driving the stage into the silver town. The four horses had caught sight of the many lights far ahead and needed no whip now to make them keep up their usual speed. George, however, in a jolly mood sung out to them merrily, cracked his lash over their heads, and hummed snatches of song prevalent at the time.

On time, as usual, the Daisy Gem bowled into Leadville at an hour when the town was at its liveliest, when monte, faro, keno, and peco were having their sway, and when the drinking dens on the mountain-sides and along the winding streets of the place, were claiming their dust-grimed and dark-shirted patrons by the scores.

Such was the Silver Hills capital when Whiplash George drove into it with the lightest load he had carried from Denver in many a long

day. He had not asked his passenger where he wanted to stop, but he took it for granted that he would patronize the best hotel in town, and he therefore bent his course toward the Grand Colorado, which was the best hostelry to be found in Leadville.

"Whoa!" cried George as he reached the front of the hotel, and brought the team to a standstill in an instant. "This is ther paradise o' Colorado! Thar's only one Leadville in existence, an' we've hit it hard, stranger!"

He said the last words as he landed on the ground beside the vehicle, and turned to help the passenger out with the black little valise which was his only luggage.

The few idlers around the Grand Colorado showed signs of life as the stage drew up in front of it, and the proprietor, a fat, fussy little man of forty-five with a diamond breastpin, and bald-headed, bustled forward to welcome a stage-load of expected guests.

"Only one, colonel," said George, "an' he's a livin' puzzle what won't be answered till next week, ef I'm a judge."

"Only one passenger?" echoed the landlord in tones of deep disappointment and disgust.

"Thet's all. Ef ye expected a million, colonel, ye'r disappointed fer certain. Shoot me fer a parson, ef I don't b'lieve he's asleep!" and George dived into the stage and clapped his big bronzed hand on the man in the darkened corner next to the horses.

"Sorry ter 'sturb yer, boss, but we're at ther end of ther line; we're in Leadville," said the driver. "Hyer! I'll take yer valise. This is ther Grand Colorado; thought ye'd want ter stop hyer; all my passengers do."

Just at this moment somebody moved on the porch of the hotel, and a light from the office fell into the stage and struck the face of the Daisy Gem's passenger.

A startling cry pealed instantly from George's lips, and he reached the landlord's side before it died away.

"What's up, George?" cried Colonel Starbottle.

"Ther galoot's dead, colonel!"

"No!"

"License me fer an evangelist ef he isn't! Go in an' see. Dead as a Winchester gopher! Durn me! ef I wouldn't hev dropped ther lines an' took to ther mountains, ef I hed known I war drivin' a hearse!"

The mere mention of George's fears brought the loafers forward, and Colonel Starbottle, the landlord, summoned up courage enough to enter the stage. The colonel was a man who had roughed it over a good portion of gold-dom before he settled down, and he had witnessed many scenes calculated to unsteady a man's nerves; therefore, the sight of a dead man was not likely to throw him into a swoon.

He had a good view of the passenger's face as he went forward, thanks to the light in the window, and it took him but a moment to see that Whiplash George had not been mistaken.

The man was dead!

In less than a minute after the landlord's confirmation of George's discovery, the light had been removed from the office to the vehicle, and more than twenty men were staring at the strange passenger George had brought to Leadville.

"He's yer guest, anyhow, colonel," said the old stage-driver. "Ye've got a bargain with me, yer know, ter take in all I fetch ter ther Colorado, an' thar war nothin' in ther agreement about dead men. Jehosaphat! why didn't he say when he left Denver thet he war goin' ter die on ther way? I'll never forgive 'im fer thet scurvy trick. Heart disease, eh, colonel?"

By this time the dead passenger had been lifted from the stage, and Colonel Starbottle gave orders to have the body carried into the bar-room connected with his establishment.

"What did you say his name was?" he asked turning to the whip king.

"I didn't say. He shut himself up like an oyster when I got close ter his name an' quit talkin'. His valise will tell yer thet, I guess."

"Thar's no valise in thet vehicle!" sung out a man who had helped to remove the body.

"It war thar when we left Denver."

"Wal, it's missin' now."

George refused to credit this announcement until he had subjected the interior of the stage to a careful search, and then he was forced to confirm the man's statement.

"It couldn't hev lost out," he said. "Baggage don't tumble out o' ther Daisy Gem ov its own accord. I'm stumped! thar's some infernal mystery hyer."

"Don Frisco mebbe," suggested a bystander.

"No sirree!" ejaculated George, with emphasis, as he wheeled upon the speaker. "I know thet highwayman's tactics too well ter lay it ter him. Don't throw ther theft o' thet valise ter Don Frisco. My passenger war right. He'll create a sensation in Leadville for all."

Whiplash George followed the body of his passenger into the bar-room, and saw it deposited on a well-used billiard table.

"Hello! ther pard's been murdered!" suddenly cried some one.

The stage-driver reached the side of the table in a single bound.

"Let me see!" he cried. "Show me a proof ov murder!"

"Thar it is—that mark under his chin. He's been garroted—strangled in yer stage, Whiplash!"

The man, as he spoke, pointed to the dead man on the table, and in full view of the breathless crowd.

Whiplash George leaned forward and inspected the discolored mark for a moment, then started back with a white face.

"Choked, by heavens! An' within three feet o' me!" he cried. "I'll find out who did this, gents! I warn't asleep, don't say it! I never sleep on my route, but I heard nothin' not a sound."

All present believed the old driver, and his asseverations only deepened the startling mystery which had come to Leadville over the Denver trail.

"I don't lay it to Don Frisco. He don't work thet way," said Whiplash George. "I'll go out an' unharness the team. No livin' man 'll want ter ride in ther Daisy Gem from now on. I—Hello! hyer's a woman!"

Yes—a woman in Leadville, a beautiful young creature not over nineteen, with blue eyes like the dead man's, and a faultless, willowy figure.

Leadville Lucy she was called; everybody knew her.

"I want to see the dead man," she said, to the rough men as she entered the bar-room, and way was instantly made for her.

She walked straight to the extemporized bier and looked for a minute at the dead, then, with a piercing cry, she threw herself upon the body.

"Victor! Victor! my brother!" she moaned.

The men looked at one another amazed. They knew for the first time that Leadville Lucy had a brother.

CHAPTER II.

THE INQUEST.

LEADVILLE had been furnished with a genuine sensation, and it lay in the discovery that the young girl had a brother.

"That swamps my time, gents," said Colonel Starbottle addressing a group of men who stood in one corner of the bar-room. "I've known that girl ever since she set foot in Leadville, but I never dreamed she had a brother. Did any of you ever hear her mention the fact?"

"Never!" said the group in chorus.

Leadville Lucy was still caressing the dead man, and calling him brother. The rough men looked wonderingly on, but no one ventured to disturb her, though her presence seemed to render them all uneasy.

"This mustn't go on all night," suddenly said the landlord of the Colorado. "Some o' you gents gently inform her that after the inquest, we'll give her brother a decent planting."

"Do it yerself, colonel."

Nerving himself up to the task of disturbing the sorrowing girl, Colonel Starbottle stepped forward and tapped her on the shoulder.

"We're sorry to disturb you, Miss Lucy, but the fact is thet thar's got to be an inquest arter which we'll find out who did this."

"Yes! yes! that's what we want!" cried Leadville Lucy starting back and facing the crowd. "We want to know who killed my brother. Who brought him dead to Leadville? Ah! he came in the stage, you say? The man who drove the vehicle ought to know something. Where is he?"

The appearance of the beautiful girl was enough to excite any one. She turned suddenly as she finished and let her left hand fall upon the breast of the corpse.

"I call upon heaven to witness Leadville Lucy's vow!" she exclaimed elevating her right hand. "I swear over his body and before the men of Leadville that the perpetrators of this foul deed shall suffer! I will ferret them out and pay them for this iniquity until all have disappeared from the face of the earth! He is yours now, men of Leadville; hold your inquest, and then let me bury him."

She stepped back with a fond lingering glance at the dead, and the next moment had walked unmolested from the room.

"Leadville Lucy's no kid," said a stalwart fellow when he had seen the girl disappear.

"Big as I am, I'd hate ter be ther galoot what choked her brother, an' ter fall inter her hands."

"Do you think Don Frisco did it?" asked a voice at his side.

"I don't know about that," was the dubious answer. "He didn't do it himself, p'raps, but somehow or other, Zach, I see ther shadder ov his hand in it. It happened in his territory—ther murder did—an' few things happen thar without ther Colorado Cut-purse knowin' is. Not by Don Frisco, mebbe, mind yer, Zach; but by somebody nigh ter him. Thet's me—Calumet Tom!"

Colonel Starbottle had always taken an interest in Leadville Lucy—some said, in secret, because she was a pretty young girl, and he a supposed widower—and he therefore determined to do all in his power to get to the bottom of the mystery surrounding the brother's death. He had the body removed to a better room and summoned to the Grand Colorado several doctors,

and one of the first justices of the peace ever elected in Leadville.

"Thar shall be no half-way work in this case," said the colonel. "We'll know suthin' or nothin', an' that before mornin'."

The head-quarters of the inquest was the bar-room, probably made so because refreshments would be handy, and there the coroner and his jury of twelve "prominent citizens" heard the report of the surgeons who came down to simple and very rough English for once, and said plainly that the man's neck had been broken by means of a rope in the hands of some experienced murderer.

As the present appeared an excellent chance to know something about Leadville Lucy's brother, the girl was called back to the bar-room and questioned.

"I cannot be mistaken," she said. "The dead man up-stairs is my brother, Victor."

"Victor?—Victor?—ah! Miss Lucy, will you please give us his full name?" asked the self-instituted coroner.

The girl colored deeply, looked down abashed, and murmured:

"That, indeed, I cannot do, for I do not know!"

The spectators exchanged singular glances; the justice eyed the girl like a man in a maze.

"You forget, sir," she said to him, "you forget that I do not even know my own real name. I am a waif on life's ocean. If I ever heard my own name spoken I have forgotten it. But I know the dead man is my brother, Victor. I cannot tell you how I know it."

"You mean, Miss Lucy, that you have a secret?"

"No, no!" said the girl quickly. "I mean nothing of the kind. What I do mean is that I know him to be my brother, yet I cannot, if I would, explain how."

"Ah, yes, we see," answered the coroner, bowing. "Were you lookin' for him?"

"Yes—no," said Leadville Lucy, smiling faintly. "I thought he would come some time, but I hardly looked for him from the east."

"From Californy?"

"Perhaps."

The questioner was silent for a minute.

"Let me get down to bed rock," he said, addressing the girl. "The passenger of the Daisy Gem stage, you say, is your brother. Would you be willin' to swear to that, Miss Lucy?"

"I believe I would," was the prompt reply. "He can be nobody else than Victor. The contents of the valise he had with him when he took the stage at Denver, would put all doubts to rest."

Ah, yes, the valise; but it was missing and nobody had the remotest idea of its present whereabouts.

The examination of the young girl being concluded, Whiplash George, the stage-driver, was recalled and put through a system of questioning which made him narrate all he had ever seen of the strange passenger he had carried to Leadville. The old fellow admitted that he had tried to draw Victor out during the journey, but beyond the remark that he was going to Leadville to create a sensation there, he got nothing at all for his pains.

"You heard nothin' suspicious durin' ther journey—no sound among ther mountains?" asked the coroner.

"Nothin'! Yes—hold on!"

The spectators craned their necks forward to catch the expected revelation.

"That man died within ten miles o' Leadville," continued George confidently.

"Ha!"

"I know it! About eleven miles out I heard 'im whistlin' ter himself as if he war tryin' ter keep off sleep. Shortly afterward I heard a noise like a wheel slidin' off a stone; mebbe it warn't a wheel, though."

"It war the passenger's gasp fer life," said the coroner with a sidelong glance at the jury. "You heard that, George?"

"Yes."

"Can you locate the exact spot?"

"I wouldn't miss it ten feet, squire."

"Keep it in yer head. Now, let me run back. The passenger got in at Denver?"

"Yes."

"The only passenger that offered himself?"

"Ther only man," answered Whiplash George.

"Who else talked ov comin'?"

"A woman, but somehow or other she backed out about twenty minutes afore I started; acted kind o' queer, too, struck me; gave no reasons fer not takin' ther seat; simply backed out—that's all thar war ov it."

"Who was this woman?"

"Shoot me, ef I know."

"What was she like?"

"Purty much like all critters ov ther sex," responded George. "She peared ter be about twenty-five, well built, like a Texas filly, an' had the blackest eyes I ever saw in a woman's head. I didn't ask any questions. She said she wanted ter come ter Leadville and I said 'all right'. But she backed out as I've said."

"With no reasons?" queried the coroner leaning forward.

"None that she mentioned. She came up ter

me an' said 'Not this day, Georgie. You've got one passenger; thet's enough.'"

A murmur ran through the crowd; the coroner tried to retain his self-possession but failed. It was evident that he, with the rest, thought he had found a clew in the stage-driver's testimony.

"She said that, did she?" he asked suppressing his excitement.

"That's what I said."

"What's your opinion, George?"

A smile appeared at the corners of the old driver's mouth.

"I'm hyer ter give none, squire," he said. "Ye'r ther chief cook an' bottle washer in this case. I've got no verdict, no opinion ter make up."

The driver's reply almost floored the justice, and he stepped back before he was formally dismissed.

"You've got an opinion though, hev'n't you, George?" whispered a man at whose elbow the driver stopped.

"Bet yer life, Tom; but thet old dodger doesn't grasp it," was the answer as the driver threw a swift glance toward the justice. "I've been a person of opinions ever since I war big enough ter crack a whip, but I know when ter keep 'em, I reckon."

Whiplash George was permitted to stay dismissed, and as he was the last witness expected to throw any light on the mysterious case, the mountain justice announced the close of the testimony and requested all but himself and the jury to retire, pending the deliverance of the verdict.

"Thet's a bad show fer yer whisky, colonel!" laughed a dozen Leadvillers as the crowd turned to the door. "You'll hev ter fill up all around when ther jury adjourns."

Within three minutes the last man of the crowd would have left the bar-room if a man from the outside had not pushed himself in and tossed a small black valise upon the billiard table!

"Jehosaphat! Thet's his luggage!" exclaimed Whiplash George leaping forward and seizing the valise which he held up to the crowd.

"Say! whar did you find it?"

"Probably whar it war lost—about nine miles out o' Leadville," was the answer from the lips of the new arrival—a tall, dark, swarthy man of about thirty, with intensely dark eyes, and, altogether, a Spanish cast of countenance. "My hoss hit it with his front foot, an' seein' thet it might hev dropped from ther stage, I fetched it hyer."

By this time one half of the crowd were eying the speaker, the other half the valise which had been passed to the coroner, who was opening it as it was not locked.

All at once the hand of the official dived into the recesses of the valise, and fumbled around in a manner which told that it was not filled.

"Nothin', squire!" asked a dozen voices.

"Nothin' but this—a piece o' pasteboard," and the coroner's fingers drew forth a whitish card which had been torn in two. He held but one piece.

"Hold! it's a personal card," he said. "Thar's nothin' on it but ther first name, an' thet is—let me see—'Victor,' by Jupiter!"

"Which confirms Leadville Lucy's belief," said Colonel Starbottle. "The dead man is her brother!"

The man who had brought the valise started slightly.

"My God! I've made a diskivery!" suddenly said Calumet Tom at the stage-driver's ear. "I know the man who fetched ther valise in. I can't be mistaken. I saw him once—in Texas—five years ago. What a fool he is ter come hyer! Watch me lift 'im."

Calumet Tom strode toward the stranger and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hello, Centipede Sam!" he shouted.

The man did not stir.

CHAPTER III.

SENDING FOR PROOF.

CALUMET TOM, seeing that the name 'Centipede Sam' had produced no visible effect on the person addressed, was half-inclined to believe for a short time that he had waked up the wrong man.

Whiplash George laughed in his sleeve at Calumet's discomfiture.

"Waked ther wrong feller, eh?" ejaculated the old stage-driver, eying Calumet. "Er mebbe ther g'loot didn't hear ye. Which war it, Calumet?"

At that moment, as if to answer George's question, the man who had fetched the valise in from the mountains, turned slowly upon Calumet Tom and looked keenly at him.

"Centipede Sam, did yer say?" he said coolly and with no display of indignation. "Ain't yer mistaken in ther man, stranger?"

"I thought not when I tapped yer shoulder. By Jupiter! ef ye ain't Centipede Sam, ye'r his ghost," was the reply.

"His ghost, I guess," grinned the suspected party, as he turned to the crowd. "No, gents, I am Yuba Dave, jest in from Denver, an' I may become a citizen ov Leadville, ef ther

climate an' ther society suits me. I've been hyer afore, but not ter stay. Ther gent yonder," glancing at Calumet Tom, "has mistaken me for a friend ov his'n. Ef Centipede Sam looks like me, he's not without some strikin' beauty; eh, pards? hal hal hal!"

The laugh was a curious admixture of mirth and derision, and the laughter glanced significantly at the numerous bottles that adorned the shelves behind the bar.

"You'll drink ter our new acquaintance, eh, gents?" he went on. "Waltz up ter ther counter an' nominate yer favorite p'isen. Thar's nothin' slow about Yuba Dave."

Needless to say the invitation to liquor-up was accepted by the whole crowd; the coroner and his jury were among the first at the counter, and Colonel Starbottle, the landlord, embraced the opportunity to sample some of his own property at the expense of another. In a short time Yuba Dave was on good terms with the prominent citizens of Leadville, and the inquest was almost forgotten in the scenes that followed.

At last, however, the justice reminded the crowd that the verdict had not been reached, and the roughs filed from the bar-room with a final drink, leaving the jury to its august deliberations.

Calumet Tom was among the first who reached the street, and he turned quickly to watch Yuba Dave, but only to discover that that individual had already slipped away.

"Don't thet confirm it?" ejaculated the old miner and trailer to himself. "He kin stand up an' say thet he isn't Centipede Sam, but I'm not obliged ter swaller ther information. Mendon't change ther identity when they change ther names. I knew ther real, ther only, Centipede Sam on ther Texas frontier, an' I'm satisfied thet I've seen 'im within ther last ten minutes. I can't make Leadville b'lieve it, mebbe, not without proof, an' thet's what I'm goin' ter git. Bet yer life, Calumet Tom, you know a man what knows Centipede Sam, an' ye'r goin' ter have him hyer."

Calumet stopped and began to scan the faces of the men who had emerged from the bar-room, and who now stood in front of the hotel.

"I see ther man I want, ther very man ov a thousand," he suddenly exclaimed, and two strides carried him to the side of a certain person, who looked for all the world like an Indian.

He was well built and dark-skinned, and had straight black hair like a savage, but his buckskin suit gave him a half-civilized appearance.

"I want yer, Pawnee," whispered Calumet Tom at the ear of this man as his fingers encircled his arm. "Come with me, an' I'll explain."

There was no answer, as if the words and the touch had been enough, and a moment later the two men were walking apart from the crowd down the street.

"Hyar," said Tom, halting at the corner of a frame building and turning to his companion. "Thar's no use goin' any further. What hev yer on hand, Pawnee?"

"Nothin'."

"D'yer want a job?"

"Mebbe so, Calumet."

"What d'yer say about goin' ter Denver?"

The listener started slightly. He knew the distance that lay between the rival towns of Colorado, and the mountain trails infested with the most formidable cut-purses of the West, and he had a right to start when Calumet Tom mentioned a journey to Denver.

"I've got only you ter trust, Pawnee," Calumet Tom went on, watching the man narrowly.

"I can't go myself, for bizness keeps me hyer. It's important that a man should go at once ter Denver. No foolish mission, Pawnee. Will you go?"

This was a straight question which could not be avoided, and Calumet's companion looked down into his eyes and said:

"Yes."

"Good! Shake!" cried Tom, seizing Pawnee's hand. "You must go at once, to-night—now! Take my hoss, er yer own, jest as yer like. Take ther hoss thet'll get yer thar soonest. Now, listen: You go ter Denver ter find a certain man an' ter say ter him this: 'Calumet Tom wants yer in Leadville, at once. Bizness.' That's ther hull message, Pawnee; you won't forget it?"

"I don't forget," was the significant answer.

"Now, the man?"

"His name is Denver Duke."

"Ho!" ejaculated Pawnee.

"Ah! you've seen ther young chap. He war hyer last summer," said Calumet, smiling. "Wal, he's ther man to whom ye'r ter deliver my nine word message. Denver Duke. You'll find him in Denver, just whar I can't tell yer, but ask ther first man you strike. As fer pay—"

"We'll talk about that when I get back," interrupted Pawnee. "Now, tell me, Calumet; would you send Pawnee ter Denver if Yuba Dave hadn't come ter Leadville?"

Calumet Tom looked into the speaker's eyes somewhat amazed at the audacity of the question. He looked for a moment like a man about to deny a serious charge, but he found the piercing eyes of Pawnee fastened upon him.

"Mebbe not," he said, "but you'll go ter Denver anyway?"

"Yes. But Yuba Dave, not *you*, sends me thar."

"P'raps."

"You called him Centipede Sam, but he didn't flinch."

"No. He's got nerves that can't be unstrung," said Calumet. "But I never forget a man when I see 'im once. I'm goin' ter block this Yuba Dave bizness with ther man ye'r ter summon ter Leadville. Denver Duke must come, Pawnee. Thar must be no failure in yer ride. Ef Don Frisco stops yer ye must shoot him dead an' go on. Now, good-by, Pawnee. Off fer Denver ye ar'. Don't forget ther message. Say: 'Calumet Tom wants yer in Leadville. At once. Bizness; no more, no less!'"

The men shook hands in the shadow of the frame building and stepped forward together. Pawnee, who was undoubtedly an Indian, promised to carry the message to Denver, and separated from Calumet Tom who watched him with eyes that shone with triumph.

"Thet red-skin never fails," murmured the old miner watching Pawnee as he moved off. "He will reach Denver, he will find Denver Duke, an' send him hyer. Then we'll see what's in this Yuba Dave game. It means suthin'; I know it. A man hunted an' wanted from Mexico ter Montana doesn't come inter Leadville boldly on an occasion like this one for nothin'. Denver Duke will say that Yuba Dave is Centipede Sam; he'll do more than that. *He'll prove it!*"

"Ef he gits hyer!" hissed a voice not twenty steps from the spot occupied by Calumet Tom when he gave utterance to his confidence.

The speaker was Yuba Dave himself, and he stood in the shadow of the very building Tom and Pawnee had just left, but not on the street on which it fronted.

"It remains ter be seen whether you an' Denver Duke will eucher ther lone hand I'm playin'," the suspected man went on, watching Calumet Tom as a cat watches a mouse. "Curse yer pryin' eyes! I thought thar war no man in Leadville likely ter know me. I didn't know you war hyer, Calumet Tom, but you sha'n't win this game; you will never see Denver Duke stand up before this rovin' chick an' say ter Leadville: 'Thar stands Centipede Sam, gents.' What's best ter do in ther case as it stands? Shall Pawnee go ter Denver with the message, er shall I wait an' strike Denver Duke on ther trail? I'll let him go," after a minute of thought; "yes I'll not stop Pawnee with his message, but I'll wait fer Denver Duke. He must never reach Leadville. Calumet Tom may say a thousand times that I am Centipede Sam, but he alone can't prove it. I've played one big hand since sundown an' won. I must win them all. Thar's a boss bonanza at ther end ov this game. Ther lone hand I'm playin' is desperate; it takes a cool head an' a steady hand ter play it through."

Calumet Tom had already passed out of the speaker's sight, and Yuba Dave struck the main street of Leadville at another place.

There was something desperately cool in the eyes of this man; he had started but once since entering the mountain town, and that was when Leadville Lucy's name was mentioned in the bar-room of Colonel Starbottle's hotel. This start, slight though it was, was very significant; it seemed to connect his coming to Leadville with the beautiful young girl who had lost a brother "at the hands of some person unknown" as the coroner's jury had reported.

If he was the man he was believed to be by Calumet Tom, his game, whatever it was, must indeed be desperate to bring him alone to Leadville where the life of the real Centipede Sam was not safe. If he was not that personage, why swear that Denver Duke should never reach Leadville to back up Calumet Tom's belief?

Yuba Dave did not remain on the streets long after he saw Calumet and Pawnee vanish. He resought the hotel in whose stables he had already seen his horse quartered with the saddle and bridle unremoved, and was shown to a room by Colonel Starbottle himself.

"To-morrow I'll get a glimpse of Leadville Lucy," he said as he threw himself on the bed, having laid two cocked revolvers on a small deal table beside his pillow. "I hold ther key to ther biggest bonanza in Colorado an' I'll work ther lock ter suit me. Hal thar's nothin' like playin' a lone hand when yer know how."

Ten minutes later all was still in the little room; the stars without were shining with all their brilliance, and for once Leadville was unusually quiet.

Everywhere in the monte dens and in the saloons the strange revelation about Leadville Lucy's brother was discussed; it was the absorbing topic. It seemed impossible that the secret could have been kept so well, that a person so well known as the girl was could have a brother and nobody in Leadville know anything about him.

Men dropped their cards to talk about it, or got dry between drinks over the same subject. Leadville had a genuine sensation, and one that pervaded all classes.

The death of the brother was deeply regretted,

and it was resolved that Leadville would do all in its power to hunt the murderer down.

"It must have been done by Don Frisco," was the prevailing conclusion. "That road-agent knows whar Victor's papers ar'. Leadville Lucy's brother must be avenged."

Nobody thought of the man sleeping quietly in one of the rooms of the Grand Colorado Hotel; nobody referred to the person who had brought the murdered man's valise empty to Leadville; he had been forgotten.

Forgotten? No.

Directly across the street from the Colorado, and with his gaze riveted upon the window of Yuba Dave's room, stood a man, like a sentinel at his post.

"I'll remain on guard till Denver Duke comes," said this man. "You've got Calumet Tom ter circumvent, Centipede Sam!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN INDIAN'S GRIP.

WAS Pawnee to get to Denver in safety? Let us see.

For almost the entire distance between the two towns the trail was a mountain one. True, it had been beaten into prominence by the hoofs of Whiplash George's stage-horses, and by the wheels of the Daisy Gem; but, for all this, it was rough and solitary, and had many dangerous places between Leadville and Denver.

The distance, which need not be recorded exactly here, was something more than one hundred miles. A part of it had, for some months prior to the opening of our story, been a favorite field for the road-agents' operations, and one, a mysterious fellow known as Don Frisco, had plied his desperate calling with signal success.

Pawnee, the Indian in buckskin, knew all this when he rode out of Leadville, and set his face toward Denver, miles and miles away. He was well armed, for one always stood in need of weapons on such a journey, though the most alert had failed to put an end to Don Frisco's depredations, and he had robbed and plundered in the coolest manner imaginable.

Pawnee was one of the few Indians in Leadville. He had been identified with the place from the first moments of its existence among the Silver Hills, and had comported himself in such a way as had made him friends among the miners and all. What if it was rumored, and pretty generally believed, that Pawnee had been compelled to fly his tribe for some crime? Nobody had ever dared to throw the charge into his teeth; the dark eyes of the red-skin held all such accusations aloof.

The red, therefore, was just the man to send on a dangerous mission; just the party to carry to Denver, despite Don Frisco and his mountain pards, the message from Calumet Tom.

It was night when Pawnee rode out of Leadville well mounted and well armed, his horse, the fleetest in the mining town, and himself the coolest and shrewdest Indian in Colorado.

It was night still when there rung out a clear-toned "blast!" which made Pawnee's horse throw his sharp ears forward, and sent the red hand of the Indian straight to the butt of one of his revolvers.

Pawnee leaned forward and saw the object that stood between him and Denver.

"Hands up thar, pard!" continued the voice. "Thar's nothin' like bein' accommodatin' in these parts."

"Nothin' like it; that's a fact," repeated Pawnee whose English was as good as that of the average inhabitant of silverdom. "You don't want anything out o' me, eh?"

"That depends, pard," said the Indian's confronter, who was a big fellow with an unusual breadth of shoulders and seated on a horse powerful, like himself. "Come for'ard an' let me take a squint at ther lay-out."

Pawnee obeyed by riding forward slowly, until his gaze fixed on the road-agent who could not be the famous Don Frisco, for he wore no silk mask that concealed one-half his face.

"Hyer I am," smiled the Indian halting almost within arm's reach of the cut-purse. "Do I look like a gold mine, or a silver camp?"

"Not much, that's a dead fact," was the answer. "Nothin' about yer clothes of course?"

"Nothin'."

"Goin' ter Denver?" asked the road-agent curiously.

"Mebbe further on."

"Not very definite, I see."

"I don't have ter be," chuckled the red.

"Cute ez a fox," was the quick ejaculation in reply. "I'll hev ter escort yer ter camp, pard. It's jist half a mile from hyer."

To camp!—to the rendezvous of Don Frisco and his band? Pawnee almost started.

The man who had halted him had not yet discovered that he was an Indian, and this discovery would follow his appearance in the light of a camp-fire. Besides, he had promised Calumet Tom to go straight to Denver, to turn aside for nothing. It was an Indian's promise, and promises Pawnee never broke.

"Fold yer hands, pard, an' ride up ter me," continued the road-agent. "Men call me Mountain Rock, an' I've been a hill rover nearly all my life. There's no discount in me, pard. Be keerful. I've got claws!"

Pawnee had evidently made up his mind what to do, for he folded his arms and rode along-side.

"Hello! an' Injun in buckskin!" cried Mountain Rock.

"Pawnee!" said the red-skin proudly.

"Ther Leadville red, eh? I've heard ov yer. Ho! Ther captain'd like ter see yer, Pawnee!"

"Don Frisco?"

"Mebbe so."

"He mayn't see Pawnee ter-night," was the answer.

"Why not?"

"Because he's not goin' ter Don Frisco!"

Mountain Rock must have expected some swift coup to follow the last words, but he was not quick enough to prevent it.

The Indian darted at him with the quickness of a mountain cat; his hand knocked aside the half-lifted revolver on its mission toward the road-agent's throat, and when it closed there Mountain Rock was almost out of his saddle, and Pawnee hardly touched his!

"Pawnee goes ter Denver, not ter Don Frisco!" grated the Indian, his maddened eyeballs seeming to leap from his head.

In vain it was that Mountain Rock struggled; he could not free himself; his powerful frame was not equal to the task he put it to at the moment of peril.

By some strange dexterity, which he alone seemed to possess, Pawnee held his victim upon the horse and choked him until he grew black in the face and could no longer gasp. It seemed to do the Indian good, for his black eyes kindled and danced mercilessly behind his raven lashes. Certain it was that Mountain Rock, like many of his predecessors, had stopped the wrong man.

There came a time when the road-agent ceased to struggle; the human vise at his throat had done its work, and when Pawnee suddenly released him, he fell to the ground like a dead man.

"No noise in that kind o' work—no pistol-practice," said the Indian, gazing down on the immovable man lying on the trail. "No, thank-ee, Mountain Rock; Pawnee goes ter Denver, not ter Don Frisco. Some other time, my night trail cat. Pawnee proved a played-out chimney, eh, Mountain Rock?" and with a chuckle of triumph the Indian urged his horse from the spot, leaving Don Frisco's pard to recover or to die, just as fortune should decree.

Pawnee had not silken red hands, nor deep-set eyes of raven blackness for nothing; he was proving already that Calumet Tom had not sent the wrong messenger to Denver.

Just one hour after Mountain Rock's failure to deal as he wished with the Indian in buckskin, a little camp some distance from the Leadville-Denver trail was suddenly invaded by a man whose appearance startled the inmates, four in number.

The fire built under an overhanging rock revealed the whole camp and the figures of the men. It also showed the man who had just come mounted on a horse, but with one hand twisted in the animal's mane as if to secure his equilibrium in the saddle.

"Gods! it's Mountain Rock, instead o' Centipede!" exclaimed one of the four men as all sprang forward simultaneously to meet the invader.

"An' he's bloody, too!"

The man who was the first to reach the horseman's side wore over his face a dark mask which, beginning at the rim of his sombrero, reached to his mouth. He was a finely molded specimen of manhood, excellently dressed in costume somewhat brigandish, and looked just what he was—the terror of the trail, Don Frisco, the cut-purse of Colorado.

"Hyer!" he cried seizing Mountain Rock in whose eyes there was a wild stare. "In God's name, who's clawed you?"

The appearance of the man in the saddle was enough to call forth the startling question put by the king of the road-agents. His face was splashed with blood, his throat seemed clawed away, and the front of his shirt was a mass of gore.

"Talk! no foolishness hyer, Mountain," continued Don Frisco. "Did yer run ag'in' a grizzly?"

"Grizzly? No. I—wish—I—had," gasped Mountain Rock. "I met ther devil."

"An' he clawed yer?"

"He choked me."

"More than that," said Don Frisco.

"His hoss must hev stepped on my neck."

"He war mounted, then?"

"Yes."

"Goin' ter Leadville?"

"Ter Denver an' beyond," he said.

"An' you told 'im ter throw up his hands which he didn't, eh?"

"I told 'im ter fold his arms an' ride for'ard, which he did," said Mountain Rock, gaining breath and strength as he proceeded. "His hand found my breathin' apparatus afore I could theroughly corral 'im. Thet red's quicker nor a cat."

"An Injun?" cried Don Frisco.

"A red in buckskin!"

"I know!" exclaimed one of the men. "It war

ther Leadville red rattler. Pawnee, they call 'im."

"That's ther serpent," grated Mountain Rock. "An' he went on ter Denver?" asked the masked road-agent.

"I think he did." Don Frisco was silent for a moment, and then he turned to the man who had identified Pawnee by Mountain Rock's description.

"Didn't you once tell me about this Leadville red, Pete?" he asked.

"Yes, captain." "He rides dangerous missions for the pards ov Leadville you said."

"Yes." "What takes him to Denver to-night?"

"That's ther question, Cap?" "Something has happened, or is goin' to," said Don Frisco after a moment's thought. "If we had Centipede hyer we might hear something. Leadville's one Injun rides ter Denver, eh? It means a trap for me—for all of us, mebbe. All right! See hyer, Mountain Rock—" "Thar! ketch 'im! He's fainted!"

With these words, loudly spoken, down came the heavy figure of the road-agent among his pards, for loss of blood had sapped his strength, and he struck the ground heavily at Don Frisco's feet.

The masked highwayman of Colorado looked at the swooning man for a moment, and then walked beyond the light of the fire.

When he reappeared he was followed by a horse whose head almost touched his arm. Coolness and determination was visible in the pair of eyes that were seen behind the silken mask.

"Wait for me somewhar 'hyerabouts," he said. "Fetch Mountain Rock around all right an' tell Centipede ter wait for me if he comes back. That Injun goes ter Denver on important bizness. Mebbe I'll go thar too."

"Ter Denver, captain?" cried the men in chorus.

The figure of the Colorado Cut-purse seemed to increase an inch in stature as he cried:

"Don Frisco dares go anywhere!"

CHAPTER V.

DENVER DUKE OBEYS.

MORE than one person took notice of the dark-skinned man in buck who rode down the streets of Denver one afternoon just as the sun was about to bid adieu to the town, and drop out of sight behind the rugged mountains.

He was an Indian; there was no mistaking it, and who could he be but Pawnee, Calumet Tom's messenger to Denver Duke?

Mountain Rock had halted the red-skin on the road, and had paid dearly for his interference, and Pawnee had reached Denver without a scratch, and eager no doubt, to deliver the message intrusted to him.

Calumet Tom had said, "If you don't find Denver Duke readily, inquire of the first man you meet," which remark indicated that the person sought was a prominent citizen of the place, which, indeed, he was.

Pawnee had seen the man he wanted to find, but he was not familiar with Denver Duke's loafing-places, as the western phrase goes, therefore, after riding through a good part of the city without meeting him, he drew rein and accosted a man on the sidewalk.

"Denver Duke, eh?" said this individual who was long and lank like a rail. "Want ter see Denver's boss dandy, d'yer say? Did yer pull up at ther Peri's Rest?"

"No; whar is it?" asked Pawnee.

"About two squares back o' yon' corner. Hit's a new place just opened—ther boss hotel o' Denver. Beats yer Grand Colorado all holler, ef yer b'longs ter Leadville. Say, what o' ther news in thet paradise, anyhow?"

The Indian paid no attention to the inquisitive sentence, but turned to find the new hotel according to the brief directions given.

"That's an Injun!" ejaculated the lank individual as Pawnee rode off. "It must be ther red citizen ov Leadville—Pawnee they call 'im, I think. An' he's lookin' up ther Denver Dandy. Thet means suthin'. Mebbe thar's a stake in it fer Corduroy Chan."

A moment later Pawnee had a follower though at a respectful distance, and he was shadowed until he rode up to the new hotel on whose porch lounged a number of men, for the most part enjoying cigars, and talking in loud tones nearly all at once.

The keen eye of the Indian ran over the motley crowd, and soon singled out the most striking person on the porch. This was a young man, not past twenty-five. He leaned against one of the wooden pillars of the porch, with a freshly-lighted cigar protruding from under a handsome black mustache. His eyes were intensely dark and sparkling, and his figure was perfection. He wore a short coat, open all the way down, and boastful of bright buttons, and worked buttonholes in front, and close-fitting pantaloons, the end of which were rendered invisible by the tops of a pair of high boots. His hat, like the majority of those seen on the porch, was of the sombrero pattern, but its texture

suggested that it had cost more than all the others put together. He was apparently unarmed.

This personage was, of course, Denver Duke, called the Denver Dandy by many, and the man to see whom Pawnee had ridden across the mountains from Leadville.

He presented a handsome appearance beside the pillar as he stood with folded arms enjoying the cigar whose snowy smoke curled in wreaths above his head, and even the unappreciative Pawnee was compelled to admire him.

"I'll put up a clear thousand that ther Jim Dandy Mine 'll hev ther lead afore three weeks!" cried a burly miner in an excited manner as he reached the middle of the porch with a bound. "It's ther boss lead ov ther day, an' yer Tiger Lily mine's nowhar ter it."

"That's talk, wind!" came from one end of the veranda. "Put up yer dust, er close yer wind-trap. No livin' man backs down one o' ther pards o' ther Tiger Lily. Plank down yer thousand on ther Jim Dandy. We'll kiver it er die!"

The challenge was received with exclamations of delight by the champions of the Tiger Lily, and the advocates of the richness of the newly-discovered Jim Dandy mine looked appealingly to their friend to back his assertions with capital. Things were getting interesting and while Pawnee looked on, the whole porch grew into an uproar.

Men rushed forward like excited soldiers in a hand-to-hand battle and offered to bet large, almost fabulous, sums on their favorite mines; a perfect bedlam reigned, yet this was no uncommon scene in the Denver of which we write.

The only cool man on the porch was Denver Duke, who leaned lightly against the wooden column and, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, took the wild scene in. He took no part, offered to bet nothing, probably because he had no mine to back; but none the less for all this did he enjoy the uproar.

So excited were the champions of the Jim Dandy and Tiger Lily mines that not one in the whole crowd saw the man who rode up to the porch, and leaning forward laid one hand on Denver Duke's shoulder. The touch was light, but it roused the Denverite, and he wheeled and looked into Pawnee's face.

"Come this way," said the Indian. "I want you."

That was enough, for without even a glance at the noisy men on the porch, Denver Duke stepped down and walked alongside of Pawnee's horse.

"Thet's a noisy lay-out back there," laughed the Denverite, glancing up into the Indian's face. "It's nip an' tuck between the Jim Dandy an' the Tiger Lily. They won't fight? Oh, no." And he laughed significantly. "One or both o' the mines may have to elect new directors tomorrow. Ah! you want me, you say?"

They were now some distance from the Peri's Rest and in reply to Denver Duke's question, Pawnee leaned over and said in low tones.

"Calumet Tom wants you in Leadville. At once. Business."

That was all, nothing more, not a word less than the message intrusted to his care.

"Wants me thar, eh?" said Denver Duke, exhibiting some surprise though he did not start. "At once, you say? Business?"

Pawnee nodded.

"Are you to go back with me?" asked the Denverite after a brief pause.

"If you say so, yes," was the answer.

"We'll see about it. Come with me." And the Denver Dandy led Pawnee to a well-to-do little frame house several squares from the hotel, and thence to a room on the second floor.

"Now," said he, "tell me what has happened in Leadville. I don't ask what Calumet Tom wants with me; just tell me what has happened thar."

Denver Duke lit a fresh cigar after handing the Indian one and leaned against the wall near the window where he waited for Pawnee to proceed, with his arms folded upon his breast.

He asked no questions while the Indian talked; nothing seemed to surprise him, and he heard the narrative of the passenger's death, the inquest, Yuba Dave's coming to Leadville—all the exciting events there—without a start.

Pawnee omitted nothing; he told his story in scanty language, but he told it all.

"Well, I'll go," said Denver Duke at the close of the narrative. "Calumet Tom sends for me; that is enough, an' besides, another is concerned in this thing."

He glanced out of the window as he finished, and saw that the sun was hardly an hour high. The shadow of the nearest mountain was already upon Denver.

"You need not go with me," he continued, addressing the Indian. "It's no journey for me. A ride across Don Frisco's territory will do me good; it will fit me for business in Leadville. No; you needn't go back with me, Pawnee."

The last sentence told the Indian that Denver Duke desired to go alone.

"Pawnee will follow when his horse has rested," was the reply.

"All right. Make verself at home hyer," said the Denverite. "I'll be back hyer before I

start." And the next moment the red-skin was the sole occupant of the little room.

He got up and went to the window, but Denver Duke had already passed from the house and was not to be seen.

"Wanted in Leadville, eh?" murmured the young Denverite as he walked briskly up the street. "Calumet says come, an' Pawnee tells me about the killin' of Leadville Lucy's brother an' how Calumet called Yuba Dave Centipede Sam an' all thet. I know Lucy pretty well I think, but hang me, if she ever intimated to me that she had a brother! The revelation did not surprise Leadville any more than it surprises me, but we'll git ter the bottom ov it, mebbe."

Denver Duke kept on until he crossed the porch of a rival of the "Peri's Rest," and passed up-stairs to a tolerably well-furnished room on the second floor.

As he entered it a very beautiful woman about thirty-five came forward to greet him.

"Do you want to go to Leadville?" asked the Denverite.

"What! are you going thither?"

"Perhaps." "I want to get out of Denver. You know that. He is not here. They say he is between Denver and Leadville. Why didn't I take the last stage? It had but one passenger."

Denver Duke smiled.

"You might not have fared well if you had taken it," he said. "That man was dead when he got to Leadville!"

"Dead?" cried the woman.

"Dead! He was garroted on the route."

"By whom? Don—"

"I think not," said the Denverite, answering her question before it was completed. "At least, it doesn't look like his work. Yes, I am going to Leadville. You are at liberty to go along. In fact, I'd like to have your company."

"I go!" said the woman, her lips meeting firmly behind the little syllables to the flashing of her eyes. "When do we start? At once? I am ready! My God! I wish I could tell you how eager I am to meet this man you Colorado people know as Don Frisco! I have not told you what impels this desire; I will not till I have settled with him. Will you meet me here? Yes! All right, Denver Duke. I will be in the saddle when you come back. You go to Leadville. I may not get there. When I find Don Frisco, I turn back. Go and get your horse."

Denver Duke withdrew.

"I like that man," said the woman. "He is cool and collected. Heavens! what an ally he would make. But I want none. I have taken an oath to do it all myself."

She walked to the window and looked down into the street. At that moment a horseman rode by, glancing once at the hotel.

"God above! that face!" cried the woman, starting back. "There's but one in the world. He comes to me! What! does he know that I have lived to reach Denver? Kind Father! give me nerve to face him. I have wrongs enough to write my name across that arch demon's heart!"

The next minute there was the sound of a footstep on the stair and Denver Duke entered, ready for the mountain ride.

"Ho! for Leadville!" he laughed to the woman. "What! won't you go?"

"Why should I?" she said, coming across the floor toward him. "You must go alone, I fear."

"All right." And with a chivalrous "good-night" Denver Duke sprang down the steps and threw himself upon a horse before the building.

"I should have told him who has come to Denver," said the woman, starting toward the window. "I'll call him back."

As quick as she could, she raised the sash, but Denver Duke was already flying down the street, bound for Leadville.

CHAPTER VI.

FACE TO FACE AGAIN.

"I'd give my boots ter know how Pawnee fares," said Calumet Tom, as he watched the sun rise once more over Leadville. "He didn't shirk; thet Injun never does. He'd ride through a herd ov ghosts ef I war ter say, 'For'ard, Pawnee.' No discount on thet red chick, I tell yer. An' Denver Duke will come ef Pawnee gits thar, an' git thar he will."

Thus spoke the broad-shouldered man of Leadville, the morning after the inquest which had been held over the body of the handsome young man fetched to town by the mountain stage.

We left Calumet Tom, as the reader will recollect, watching the windows of the room occupied by Yuba Dave in the "Grand Colorado," and we might say here that his vigils had extended far into the night.

But nothing had occurred to tell Calumet Tom that the man he believed to be Centipede Sam had any intention of running away. On the contrary, he gave signs of keeping his word—that he had come to Leadville to remain if he liked the society, and Calumet, therefore, had watched the hotel in vain.

The old fellow would have given his boots to have known that Pawnee, his red messenger, had

passed the road-agents' territory safely, and that he was in a fair way to reach Denver Duke without accident.

The sun came up over the mountain spur and looked down upon a group of bronzed men congregated in front of the Grand Colorado discussing the thrilling events of the past night. Whiplash George, the stage-driver, was in the crowd reiterating the declaration that if he had known he was handling a dead man, he would have abandoned the Daisy Gem and taken to the wild trails; he would never drive another stage; no! never! he'd go to the mines first.

Calumet Tom watched the crowd from a distance in hopes of seeing Yuba Dave circulating among it, but that new arrival was not to be seen. As he had not retired at an early hour, perhaps he was still courting the somnolent god, and would make his appearance later in the day.

"I b'lieve I'll go an' see Lucy," said Tom to himself. "That brother bizness gits cl'ar away with me. I'm inclined ter b'lieve thet she knows more than she told Squire Sam last night, an' mebbe I kin git a bit o' information from her. I'll try it, anyhow."

Calumet Tom walked away, leaving the crowd at Colonel Starbottle's hostelry behind, and stopped in a short time before a little one-story frame house, which stood on one of the most quiet streets in Leadville.

His rather heavy knock was responded to by the opening of the door, and Leadville Lucy invited the Leadviller inside.

The girl, who was very beautiful, showed few traces of the scenes through which she had passed the previous night, and her calm, almost smiling exterior surprised Calumet Tom.

The big fellow was at a loss how to begin, but having led him into a little back room, Leadville Lucy came to the rescue.

"You have just come from the street?" she said. "Well, what news do you bring me?"

"Nothin', Lucy—nothin'," answered Calumet Tom.

"I heard of the valise, an' how it was brought to Leadville," continued the girl. "Yuba Dave found it, accidentally, of course."

"Yuba Dave?" echoed Tom, and there he stopped. "You may have heard, Lucy, that I gave him another name last night."

"No; that is news to me."

"Well, I did. I called him Centipede Sam. Did you ever hear that name before?"

The girl shook her head.

"Mebbe you hev'n't, but I hev," said Calumet Tom, with emphasis. "He looks like ther original an' genuine Centipede Sam; he talks like 'im, an' I'll bet my teeth thet thet's who he is!"

"Well, what of it?" asked Leadville Lucy, innocently.

"He's got no bizness in Leadville, an' he's hyer fer no good. But I didn't come hyer to talk of him, Lucy. I want yer ter be squar' with Calumet Tom, anyway. I never set up a cool deck on a woman, an' I wouldn't eucher you, Lucy, fer all Colorado. Ef you ketch me playin' a double game, bore my brain-box with a forty-four."

Leadville Lucy smiled, wondering what the miner could be getting at.

"About your brother, Lucy. I'm hyer ter ask you about him."

"And it is precious little I can tell you. You heard me answer the justice last night?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think I told him all I know."

Calumet Tom looked disappointed and confused. Had he reached bottom already?

"It's strange—deuced strange, Lucy," he said at length. "Hyar, ye've lived a long time in Leadville an' never a whimper about Victor, as you call 'im."

"Nobody asked me," the girl said naively.

"An' nobody suspected," was the miner's retort. "Look hyer. Whiplash George got a peep inter Victor's valise afore he left Denver. Thar war a number o' folded papers in it; looked like lawyer dockermments, George says."

Leadville Lucy appeared to give a slight start.

"What do you know about papers ov thet kind?" asked Tom.

"Nothing."

"An' yet ye'r confident ther dead man is yer brother?"

"I am."

"It stumps me; it gits all Leadville," ejaculated Calumet Tom. "Yer brother comes ter town, but gits hyer dead, his valise rifled o' some valerable papers an' himself killed so noiselessly thet Whiplash George on his box knew nothin' about it. It's a case deep enough ter puzzle a New York detective, an' it's no wonder thet it stumps Leadville. Never hed a case hyer like it. They talk about Don Frisco when they discuss ther murder—ther boyees do, but I don't. It's not Don Frisco's way. A man with a cat's step an' silk fingers did it. I kin see thet ef I am only Calumet Tom ov Leadville."

The girl listened with bated breath to the miner as he rattled along, and when he had concluded he found her at his side, her hand on his sleeve and her eyes fixed upon his face.

"What do you think? Have you no suspicions?" she whispered.

"None ter speak ov hyer," was the reply. "It was a deuced queer murder, Lucy. Victor war killed fer ther papers he hed in his valise."

"Deeds of rich claims think you, Tom?" asked Lucy eagerly.

"I'm not prepared ter say. When we know what them papers contained, we'll know why yer long lost brother came ter Leadville dead."

The girl stepped back and stood statue-like before the Leadviller. A new trail seemed to have been opened to her by Calumet Tom's last words.

"You are right, Tom!" she said, speaking suddenly. "The contents of the papers furnished the motive. Victor was followed from his starting-point."

"Not in the stage, though?"

"No."

"The murderer was one of those active, cat-like men who have long soft fingers, an' sharp eyes like a hawk's. He jumps upon the stage while it bowls along, opens the door behind, that opens without noise, glides forward to ther corner whar Victor dozes, leaps upon him like a cat an' clutches his throat."

"My God! Tom! did you see him do it?" cried Leadville Lucy, springing forward again, and grasping the miner's arm.

"No, but I kin imagine just how it war done—just how such a fellar would work," was the answer. "Hevin' finished Victor, he picks up ther valise an' escapes. On the trail he rifles ther valise ov its papers an' lets it fall inter Yuba Dave's hands. When we git ter ther bottom ov this crime you'll find it war done jest thet way, Lucy—"

"Hark! there is some one at my door."

Leadville Lucy went into the front room, leaving the door leading into the apartment occupied by Calumet Tom wide open, and responded to the raps that had broken the old miner's sentence.

"Aha! Good-mornin', miss," said a voice that made Calumet Tom start when it reached his ears, and the next moment he saw the figure of Yuba Dave following Leadville Lucy across the floor of the front room and toward him.

There was no escape; the meeting was inevitable.

"Face ther double dealer, Calumet," said the miner to himself. "Hyar comes ther biggest liar in sixteen States, an' he's hyer fer a purpose. Meet 'im! thwart 'im!"

Cool at all times, and under all circumstances, as the events of the past night might demonstrate, Yuba Dave did not start when he was suddenly brought face to face with Calumet Tom in the little room.

"Ah! I need not introduce you," said the girl glancing swiftly from man to man. "You have met before."

"You kin bet yer life we hev, Lucy," said Calumet Tom, throwing a searching look at Yuba Dave. "I saw this man at ther Grand Colorado last night, an' probably long afore thet. He's ther feller what fetched Victor's valise ter ther inquest."

"I am the man," assured Yuba Dave more to Lucy than to Calumet Tom. "I found it empty on ther trail, probably not far from—"

"From whar ye found it!" interrupted Calumet Tom. "Look a-hyer, Centipede Sam; straighten up thar, an' tell me without flinchin' thet Yuba Dave is now an' allus war yer true name. Remember thet we stan' in the presence ov Victor's sister. I am her friend, now, henceforth an' forever! I call yer Centipede Sam. Stay in Leadville thirty-six hours an' I'll prove it!"

"Prove it now—hyer!" grated the black-eyed man, his hand darting toward a revolver that clicked the moment he touched it. "Centipede Sam, eh? Prove it if you dare, Calumet!"

"No! no! No bloodshed here!" rung from Leadville Lucy's lips, as she threw her figure in between the two men who stood hardly five feet apart on the eve of a desperate encounter.

"This is my house—my home. You shall not fight!"

"If you say so, girl, we will not," said Yuba Dave, looking down into the soft yet frightened eyes of the beauty of Leadville. "At another time, Calumet Tom, if you wish it. This little girl says 'not hyer,' an' 'not hyer' it shall be."

"Suit yerself!" flashed back Calumet Tom, as he stepped toward the door, for the purpose of leaving the two alone. "Remember that I call you Centipede Sam—the man whose head has been in the market for ten years, an' Don Frisco's right bower. Stay hyer thirty-six hours an' I'll convince all Leadville that I am right. Look at that man's hands, Lucy. I wouldn't have 'em at my throat for all Colorado! Good-morn, Centipede!"

And a moment later Calumet Tom had passed from the house, a look of triumph in his eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

CALUMET TOM'S BOLD GAME.

"I GUESS he knows that I mean bizness," muttered Calumet Tom, when he found himself clear of Leadville Lucy's home and on the street once more. "He'll not stay ther thirty-six hours

out; I know it; thet is, not ef we let 'im go. But I'll see about thet myself."

Yuba Dave had been left with the girl whom he had visited without an invitation and no ceremony.

Perhaps he thought that, as he had brought Victor's valise to town, he had a certain license which entitled him to visit Leadville Lucy without the semblance of an invitation, and Calumet Tom left him at the house still believing that he was the genuine Centipede Sam, of Texas border fame, and that his appearance in Leadville at the time meant a deep-laid scheme, probably against the girl.

The old miner had now to wait till Denver Duke should come, and as the day wore away, he cast many an anxious look down the trail which led to Denver.

The inquest at the Grand Colorado was followed that afternoon by a funeral, and Victor was laid to rest in the little cemetery at the foot of a mountain, and within its shadow. The chief mourner was, of course, the young girl who stood silent and tearful over the grave, and watched the rough but kindly miners fill it tenderly.

She was observed by every one. The Leadvillers could hardly bring themselves down to the belief that they had buried Leadville Lucy's brother, and there were some who almost openly scouted the idea, saying in whispers to their associates that the girl was certainly mistaken, or else she was playing some inexplicable game.

After his interview with the girl, Yuba Dave put in his time about the town, dropping in at the numerous gaming-places, or smoking a cigar with Colonel Starbottle, whose acquaintance was very easily formed. He found the murder, and the mystery attending it, the absorbing topic; he heard Whiplash George declare that he had driven his last stage across the mountains; hauling one dead man was enough for him.

"Calumet Tom intimates thet ther valise warn't empty when I picked it up," said Yuba Dave to himself when he was alone. "Wal, what if it warn't? Thet's my bizness; it's connected with ther lone hand I'm playin' for ther big bonanza. I'm no fool, Calumet. I never thought o' totin' Victor's valise ter Leadville loaded like it war; not much! I've held lone hands afore, an' ef I recollect aright, I played 'em ter win, too. Tackle me, tackle a tiger! Yuba Dave, eh? Ther handle doesn't suit yer, I see, Calumet Tom. You take exceptions ter it. Wal, mebbe ye'r right; ha, ha, ha! Centipede Sam's head ar' still on his shoulders, an' ef he knows himself, it's goin' ter stay thar!"

Before the sun went down on that eventful day, Yuba Dave had found numerous acquaintances in Leadville, and had succeeded in rendering his presence agreeable to a certain portion of its population. He had come to town provided with considerable money, which he had risked in several monte-dens, and before night had negotiated for a few shares in the Big Cabin mine, an investment not considered very sound.

He reiterated his first statement that he had come to Leadville to stay, and by sundown all had forgotten that Calumet Tom had called him Centipede Sam. Near the close of the afternoon, and shortly after the burial, he was seen to pay a second visit to Lucy's home, seen by the man who had watched him all day, save when he threw anxious glances down the Denver trail.

"Gettin' durned familiar, strikes me," ejaculated the watcher who was of course our old friend Calumet Tom. "It's a part of yer game," Centipede, but jist what thet game is I can't make out. Wait till my pard comes; wait till Denver Duke rides inter Leadville. Then we'll get down ter hard-pan, an' strike ther bonanza."

Night was throwing her somber pall over the capital of the Silver Hills when Yuba Dave emerged from Leadville Lucy's house, and walked straight to the stables in the rear of Colonel Starbottle's hostelry. Five minutes later he came out mounted on a fleet-looking horse and equipped for a night ride.

"Goin' ter leave, eh?" exclaimed a man who had witnessed these proceedings. "Yer don't want ter wait till Denver comes. Wal, I don't blame yer, Centipede; but I say 'no' to yer goin' off."

At the same time the man who spoke these words vaulted into a saddle and rode toward the eastern confines of Leadville, drawing rein near the last shanty, and cocking a revolver.

He faced the Leadville-Denver trail and waited quietly for the man riding toward him from the town.

"It's takin' ther bull by ther horns," he said, "but by heavens! thar's no other hold just now. You've got ter stay hyer till Denver Duke comes, ef yer stay dead. My proof's on ther road, an' ye've got ter face it, Centipede."

The man called Yuba Dave was riding straight toward the lone horseman waiting quietly for him in the suburbs of Leadville.

The shadows were thick and dark, and he could not see far enough ahead to distinguish the man in the saddle.

At last he came up riding slowly as if in no

hurry to quit the place and all at once his watch-er leaned forward and said "Halt!" in low but distinct tones.

Instantly Yuba Dave looked up and saw the speaker.

"You?" he cried.

"Certainly. Who else was yer lookin' for?" was the answer.

"All right! You want ter fight me hyer!"

"No. I'm goin' ter keep yer in Leadville till my proof comes. You say you ar' not Centipede Sam. I kin prove that assertion a lie. Ho! draw ef ye dare, Centipede." And the revolver of Calumet Tom grinned in Yuba Dave's face.

To say that the double-dealer was taken aback would not express the situation. The old miner's action both dumfounded and maddened him.

"Do you think you kin keep Yuba Dave in Leadville?" he hissed. "Fool ye ar' ef you do, Calumet Tom!"

"Wal, we'll try it, Centipede. About face!"

Yuba Dave bit his lip and sullenly wheeled his horse.

The rage of a tiger was at his heart, and he glared at Calumet Tom with all the fury of that beast.

"You won't fight me, eh? When did yer lose all yer grit, Calumet?" he cried.

"No fight afore my pard comes; arter thet we'll try conclusions, Centipede," was the answer. "Don't make a fool o' yerself now. You'll stay with Colonel Starbottle awhile longer. For'ard!"

The two horses started simultaneously toward Leadville. Calumet Tom kept a neck behind his prisoner with the revolver raised and with a finger at the trigger. His eyes of course watched Yuba Dave with a kind of triumph that made their depths dance, and in this manner the two men rode back into Leadville and toward the crowd that thronged the sidewalk in front of the Grand Colorado.

A night lamp in a glass frame hung above the main entrance to the hotel and showed the crowd and the two men who came up to startle everybody who saw them.

"Whoa!—halt!" commanded Calumet Tom and the two steeds stopped as a sudden impulse brought the crowd forward. "Gents," he went on. "I have fetched Yuba Dave as you know him back ag'in' his will. What I do I'm alone responsible fer. I hed ter ketch thet animile somewhar, an' I laid hold of his horse. I want that man ter stay in Leadville till a certain man gits in from Denver. I've sent Pawnee arter him an' he'll be hyer afore mornin' perhaps. I say thet Centipede Sam sits on thet hoss. Ther man I've sent for will make my words good. If he don't, men ov Leadville, you kin hang this Colorado gopher! Yuba Dave? Thet's a convenient name ov his own. He is Don Frisco's right bower, an' I say that he knows more about young Victor's valise than he told last night!"

A derisive smile passed over Yuba Dave's face at this accusation.

"All right, gents," he said, looking down on the crowd. "Stay I will, if you insist upon it. As fer Calumet Tom, ther dirty coward! he dare not fight a free lance ov ther mountains."

"After Denver comes!" said Calumet.

Yuba Dave choked down an outburst of wrath.

"What's yer pleasure?" he asked his captor.

"Confinement in ther Colorado till Denver comes."

"Guarded?"

"Yes, ef yer refuses yer word o' honor."

"Thet I'll not run away?"

"Yes."

Yuba Dave laughed.

"Mebbe ye'd better watch me," he said. "I've got business out of Leadville, an' I'm liable ter go ter it."

Calumet Tom looked at the crowd as if in search of some person he could trust.

"I'll be responsible for him!" exclaimed the landlord. "Let Yuba Dave come in. It's a queer proceedin' anyhow. I say hyer, gentlemen, thet I don't believe thet man Centipede Sam any more than I b'lieve myself ter be Robinson Crusaw. Alight, Yuba Dave. You'll find ther Colorado a palatial prison."

Yuba Dave slid from his horse and threw the lines over the shining pommel of the saddle, as he sent a look of madness toward Calumet Tom.

"You'll take me for security, eh, Calumet?" said Colonel Starbottle as he linked arms with Yuba Dave and led him toward the house. "We'll see you later, gents," and the two men disappeared.

Calumet Tom regarded Colonel Starbottle's audacity with amazement, but only for a moment. He leaned toward the crowd and said:

"I stake my life on my charge, boys. That man is ther real an' genuine Centipede Sam. Denver Duke will make it cl'ar as noonday when he comes. I say thet he knows more about how Victor died than he lets on. Stand by me till mornin'; it's all I ask. Guard all ther exits ov this ranch an' watch thet hoss. Remember thet Leadville Lucy has suffered. Stand by ther honor of this town. We strike Don Frisco a staggerin' blow when we corral

ther real Centipede Sam. Wait till Denver comes."

The effect on the crowd was apparent. In less than five minutes keen-eyed guards were watching the exits of the hotel and more than one-half of Leadville was waiting for the man expected from Denver.

Slowly the hours of the night wore away, and it must have been eleven o'clock when a female figure came up to a burly man who stood within pistol-shot of the Grand Colorado and laid a hand on his arm.

"Will you grant me a favor, Tom?" she asked in pleading tones.

"Bless you yes, Lucy. I'd do anything for you. What is it?"

"Give up this watch. Let Yuba Dave go."

Calumet Tom's revolver almost dropped from his hand.

"Never!" he said in sterner tones than he wanted to use when he looked down into Leadville Lucy's face. "I can't do that, girl. My honor is at stake. I've said publicly thet thet man is Centipede Sam, sometimes called thet Death Spider ov Texas, an' by ther eternal! I'm goin' to prove it! I'm waitin' for Denver Duke; we're all waitin' for him. Hark!"

Calumet Tom turned half-way round, and listened toward far-away Denver. Lucy listened, too, and heard the same sounds that had reached the old miner's ears—the gallop of a horse coming toward them.

"Is that Denver Duke?" asked the girl.

"I think so. Arter he has spoken if Lucy of Leadville says 'let ther prisoner go,' go free he shall. Look up ther trail. We'll see ther com-in' man in a minute."

And they did.

All at once a well-blown horse came from the gloom ahead and stopped the moment Calumet Tom's bronzed hand clutched the bridle.

"Hello! Denver!" he cried.

The man in the saddle leaned forward.

"Calumet!—Lucy!" came in return.

It was Denver Duke!

"On time as yer always ar'," continued Calumet Tom. "We've got him fast, boy. I want yer ter identify a man."

"Centipede Sam, eh?"

"Yes. Who told yer?"

"Pawnee."

"Come along, then. We'll find ther g'loot at ther Colorado. Ther trap is guarded. I've staked my honor on yer word, Denver. You mustn't fail me."

"Not if you have the Death Spider ov Texas," was the answer.

"I've got him!"

Riding between Calumet Tom and the girl Denver Duke was conducted to the Grand Colorado, in front of which he slid from the saddle.

A crowd already collected there went in at his beck.

"Whar's yer guest, colonel?" asked Calumet Tom looking triumphantly at the landlord. "Hyar's ther expected proof from Denver. Waltz forward, Centipede Sam."

The next instant the report of a fire-arm startled every one, and with the noise of shattered glass, Denver Duke sprung toward the counter and fell at its foot!

The crowd wheeled toward the front door.

"Centipede Sam's on ther outside. Let me at him!" yelled Calumet Tom dashing forward.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE FREAK.

THERE was a general rush for the door, and the first man that reached the street was Calumet Tom. He landed on the sidewalk in the glare of the hotel lamp, with a revolver clutched in each hand, and hurled his defiance at the person whose shot had dropped Denver Duke in his tracks.

There was no reply, no answering shot, and Calumet Tom wasted his anger on the night air.

"Wal, did ther bullet find his brain-box?" demanded Calumet, pushing his burly figure back into the hotel. "Hello! it war a close call, Denver, eh?"

His last sentence was called forth by the sight of Denver Duke, who leaned against the counter with a few splotches of blood on his pale and handsome face.

"Closer than we generally want, Calumet," he said, with a smile. "You didn't find him?"

"No; the coward shot an' cut dirt. He saw you tumble, an' that war enough for him. But whar's ther colonel? He war goin' ter be responsible for Centipede Sam's conduct."

Colonel Starbottle came forward and said that Yuba Dave had deceived him if he had fired the shot through the window; he had more confidence in the man than that.

Calumet Tom regarded the speaker with a mad, scornful look.

"You'd trust ther devil, colonel, when I wouldn't give his best imp an inch ov rope!" he said, and then turned to Denver Duke again.

The man from Denver had been saved by the glass through which the leaden missile had passed. The murderer's aim had been true enough, but the pane had deflected the bullet, and instead of a dead man, only a few drops of blood had been drawn.

"Thar's no use in lookin' for Centipede; he's

gone for this time," continued Tom. "His hoss may be in ther stable, but I doubt it. You get in too late, Duke. A few minutes sooner an' I could hev stood yer up afore that g'loot an' seen you unmask ter all Leadville, ther Death Spider ov Texas."

"We'll get him some other time," said Denver Duke calmly and with confidence. "It takes sand for him to come to Leadville; but he has it, Tom. No ordinary business fetched him here."

"Ov course not. Thar's a big scheme afoot; I know it. At ther bottom ov Centipede Sam's comin' ter Leadville lies a first-class bonanza. An' Lucy's somehow connected with it."

"Lucy?" asked Denver Duke, in amazement.

"Yes, that girl, an' no one else. Come with me. I'll give yer ther hull lay-out as I hev it, an' mebbe ye kin find suthin' we kin bank on."

Calumet Tom and Denver Duke walked from the hotel and slowly down the street to a small house built of rough planks and known as the miner's abode.

Pushing open the door Calumet Tom struck a light and threw himself upon a three-legged stool, while he motioned his companion to the only chair visible in the apartment.

Then he began and told Denver Duke all he knew about the events of the last forty-eight hours. Much of the narrative the Denverite had already heard from Pawnee, the Indian messenger; but Calumet Tom supplied a few particulars which the red-skin had overlooked.

"I'd like to see Lucy myself; but it is too late now," said the young man. "She went straight home no doubt after I came, and knows nothing about the shot and Centipede Sam's escape."

"But she isn't asleep. She's up waitin' for news an' for you, Denver. She's got a right ter expect us, an'—"

"We'll go and see her!" exclaimed Denver Duke.

Five minutes later the two friends stood before Leadville Lucy's door and knocked. There was no response.

"Hang it all! we're hyer ter see her an' see her we will," said Calumet Tom.

The miner opened the door and went in, followed by Denver Duke. Still nobody greeted them; they walked through the front room into the little apartment beyond, which was lit up by a lamp that stood on a table.

"Nobody at home, sure enough," said Calumet Tom, halting in the middle of the room and looking around. "Mebbe she's up in town watchin'—No! hyer's a note—a letter for somebody!"

Not until that moment did the speaker's gaze fall on the bit of paper lying on the table near the lamp and in the shadow of its base.

His hand darted at it with the swiftness of a hawk and the next moment he handed it to Denver Duke, whose hand had been stretched forth to take it.

"Read it, Denver; quite likely she left it for you!" he said.

The Denverite approached the table as he unfolded the paper, and in the light of the lamp he read the following sensational note:

"TO CALUMET TOM and his FRIEND (if they come):—
"I have gone away with Yuba Dave who has sworn to put me on the trail of the man who killed Victor. He may be the man Calumet says he is, but he has sworn by all that is holy that he is simply Yuba Dave, an' his release breaks Calumet's charge. I want to avenge Victor. I want the papers taken from his valise. They are almost as important as revenge. Yuba Dave has promised to show me the trail. I will not be gone long; not more than twenty-four hours, at the best. Be here when I come back. I may need your advice and your services."
LEADVILLE LUCY."

As Denver Duke read the letter aloud he was watched by Calumet Tom whose countenance was the picture of mingled rage and disgust.

Lucy gone with Yuba Dave, or Centipede Sam as they knew him? They could hardly credit it and yet there was the letter—her own—confirming the flight.

For a minute after Denver Duke finished neither spoke; the letter was a revelation which had taken their breath, if not their senses.

"Let me tackle it, Denver," said Calumet Tom taking the letter from his companion's hand, and then he read it slowly watched narrowly by the Denverite all the time.

"See ther depths ov thet Texas Spider's scheme!—see how he wove his infernal web about Lucy!" suddenly cried Tom, looking up. "His release," he says. He came hyer arter he shot at you, Denver. He told the girl thet we hed failed ter prove him Centipede Sam an' thet he war only Yuba Dave. See? Then he swore ter show her ther trail ov Victor's murderer; he worked her up, got her excited an' took her off afore she knew what she war doin'. Thet's proof enough thet he is ther Death Spider ov Texas, Denver. Who wouldn't swar ter it now? He did hold out a big inducement ter Lucy; ther blood trail an' ther papers taken from Victor's valise. What a bait it war for Leadville Lucy! An' it caught ther fish. Blazes! I could choke thet Spider ter death!"

Calumet Tom certainly looked able and anxious to perform the work mentioned in his last sentence, and he threw a mad glance toward the door as if he hoped it would open to admit the man who had outwitted them.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Denver Duke.

"Beat ther game thet devil is tryin' ter play! He's famous for lone hands. More than one has he played through successfully, but this is ther first one he ever tried in Leadville. Make it his last; thet's my doctrine! He show Lucy ther trail ov Victor's murderer? I can do thet myself."

"You, Calumet?" ejaculated the man from Denver.

"Why can't I? It can be struck hyer in Leadville—ter-night."

"No!"

"By ther eternal, I will strike it."

Denver Duke looked into the old miner's face, but made no reply.

"Never mind, Denver," continued Calumet Tom. "Lucy won't come back ter-night, so we'll not wait for her hyer. We'll go up to ther Colorado an' see ther lay-out thar. Not a word about Lucy's goin' off with thet mountain devil. Let ther pards up-town find it out at their leisure. You've hed no supper. We'll take one ter-gether at Colonel Starbottle's ranch."

The two friends went back to the hotel and ordered the best supper the house could get up. While it was being prepared they walked into the bar-room where they were greeted by a number of men who were discussing the shot through the window and its results.

Leadville Lucy's flight was still unknown to the crowd, and the two men did not enlighten them, although the girl's name was mentioned several times.

From the bar-room the couple passed into the rough dining-hall and sat down to their supper. "Arter supper we'll talk about ther trail," said Calumet Tom to Denver Duke. "I can't git thet girl outen my head. Gone off with Centipede Sam! I'd sooner travel with a tiger."

The young Denverite would have replied if the door of the dining-room had not prevented by opening just at that moment, and Colonel Starbottle whisked into the room.

"A lady wants to see you," he said, addressing Denver Duke.

"Leadville Lucy!" exclaimed Calumet Tom.

"No—a woman I never saw before," answered the landlord. "She just got in, I guess."

Denver Duke was already on his feet.

"Where is she?"

"In ther office. Wants ter see you bad, I take it." And the Denverite followed him out.

As he passed into the office of the hotel, he saw a woman waiting for him at the clerk's desk. She was well dressed in short skirts, tight sleeves, and boots, and the upper part of her face was concealed by a silken mask which began under the brim of her little gray sombrero.

"Ah! you are here!" she exclaimed as Denver Duke came forward.

The Denverite started at the voice; he had certainly heard it before.

"Yes. I came in a short time ago," he said.

"Were you followed?"

"I think not. If I was, I beat my follower, an' got into Leadville safe."

"It is strange—very strange," said the masked woman. "You were followed from Denver. I am sure of this, and I was not far behind the person on your track. He was a good rider, and so was I. I am glad to be assured of your safety, but where did I lose him?"

"Who followed me?" asked the young sport.

"Don Frisco."

"From Denver?"

"Yes."

"You must be mistaken. That road-agent king would never show his face there. The mountains are his work-grounds. There's too much on his head for him to seek towns."

"But I know him. My God! I have cause to," exclaimed the mask. "Ah! you know me now. I am the woman you left in Denver—I am Keno Kate. I have hidden my face for a purpose from the pards of Leadville. I cannot be deceived. Don Frisco followed you from Denver; I followed him, but somewhere and in some manner I lost him."

"Did he see you?"

"I think not."

Denver Duke made no reply, but it was evident that he could hardly credit the assertion that he had been followed and from Denver by the greatest road-agent the Rockies had ever known. He knew that Don Frisco always wore a mask, and he could not believe that he would ride deliberately into Denver, which was covered with posters, as was Leadville, offering a reward for his head.

"There was a man eating supper with you. I got a glimpse of him when the door opened," suddenly resumed the woman. "Is he your friend?"

"Yes; he is Calumet Tom."

"Calumet—Tom?" cried the masked woman. "I know that man!"

Before Denver Duke could interpose a hand, she sprung toward the dining-room which opened into the hotel office, and threw aside the door.

Calumet Tom, whose appetite seemed to equal a wolf's, was still at the table, and knew nothing of the woman's presence until she had stopped three feet from the threshold and uttered his name in tones sufficient to startle even him.

"Jehosaphat! Beauty in a mask!" ejaculated the burly miner, getting upon his feet.

"Stay where you are, Calumet Tom!" cried the woman, pointing a quivering finger at the amazed man. "Where's the oath you took years ago? Broken! Don't come near me now, or I may drop you in your boots! I thought you took that oath to keep it. I swore once that I would shoot you on sight. Stand off, oath-breaker, an' think of your duplicity. I will succeed myself where you have failed."

That was all. The masked woman finished abruptly and turning on her heel, walked back into the office, leaving Calumet Tom at the table, a statue of astonishment.

"The last seraph I expected ter see turn up in Leadville!" he mused. "I war expectin' a ghost as soon as her. She's got thet oath bizness nearly right. I did fail, but it warn't my fault. I'll make her hear my explanation."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BUCKSKIN THIEF.

"HASN'T Centipede come back yet?"

"Not yet, cap'n."

The questioner gave vent to an oath of madness, and turned from the man who leaned against a horse and was quietly enjoying a pipe.

The scene was in the mountains a few miles east of Leadville, and the hour was midnight or shortly after the last event recorded in the previous chapter.

Don Frisco the masked road-agent had got back to his little band, and the man whom he had addressed was a member of his band, one of those big, broad-chested, dark-faced fellows who had helped him rob many a stage, or had tumbled more than one man from his saddle.

"You got back safe I see, cap'n," remarked the man with the pipe after several whiffs during which Don Frisco had said nothing.

"When did I ever come back any other way?" growled the road-agent, whose mask was not in its usual place thus showing a well-cut face, decidedly handsome, mustache-adorned, and black eyed.

"Never, cap'n, never."

"An' I never intend ter," said Don Frisco, with a light chuckle, and a smile at the corners of his mouth. "Whar's Mountain Rock?"

"Watchin' somewhar."

"Fer ther Injun thet choked 'im?"

"I expect so."

"A fool for vengeance," was the reply. "That red-skin's in Denver. I left 'im thar."

"You've been thar, then?" exclaimed the smoker, with an amazed look.

"Yes."

"Not with yer mask on, cap'n?"

"See hyer. I'm no fool, Quartzzy," cried Don Frisco, sharply. "I went ter Denver just as I am now, inspected a part ov ther town, peeped inter several monte shops, drank at a bar over which hung my picture, mask an' all, with ther reward under it, and rode out o' town, not very far behind a fellar whose acquaintance I wanted to form."

"But yer didn't, eh?"

"No; he hed ther start, but not ther better hoss. I followed him a long distance, Quartzzy, an' let him go on ter Leadville."

"Did yer know him?"

"I should narrate; you've heard ov Denver Duke?"

"Who hasn't?"

"Thet's it. Wal, it war thet Denverite I folloed. Ther Injun what choked Mountain Rock went from Leadville ter Denver with a message for him. I know that, Quartzzy."

"Wal?"

"It means suthin'," said Don Frisco with an expression of seriousness that arrested the listener's attention.

"Mebbe they've corraled Centipede," he suggested.

"Heavens, no! All Leadville can't do that," exclaimed the road-agent. "It takes more than one trap ter ketch an' hold ther only Centipede Sam on top o' ground. I b'lieve I'll go ter Leadville."

The last sentence was spoken by a man who had carefully considered the danger the visit implied. The smoker leaning against the horse looked hard at Don Frisco, but did not speak. The mountain cut-purse had just returned in safety from Denver; why not invade Leadville?

"Quartzzy," he continued, "I want you with me on this trip. I'll leave a letter for ther other pards in ther old post-office. Git ready. We start in five minutes. Ho! for Leadville!"

As Quartzzy turned away, Don Frisco drew a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote out a brief message, after which he folded the paper and placed it in a cleft of the wall about six feet from the ground.

"The pard who comes first will read it first," he said, stepping back. "Mebbe it'll be Centipede, mebbe Mountain Rock. It's all ther same ter me who drops inter camp first."

He walked behind a huge boulder and remained hidden for fifteen minutes. When he came forth again he did not resemble Don Frisco, but looked for all the world like hundreds of well-to-do mine-owners seen every day

in Denver and Leadville. His pards could have told in a scrutinizing glance that it was the captain, but the simple disguise which was effective in its very simplicity would have deceived all others.

Quartzzy had but little change to make; he had merely put on a jacket and taken the cord and tassels from his hat.

"Ready?" asked Don Frisco glancing at his man.

"I guess so, cap'n. If you say Leadville, Leadville it is if every whisky-glass thar is a lasso. You left a letter?" glancing at the mountain post-office.

"Yes—for ther first one thet comes. You are armed, Quartzzy?"

"To ther teeth."

"With new weapons?"

"With a pair o' droppers taken from ther crowd we plucked two months ago."

"Let me see."

Don Frisco's companion threw back the edges of his jacket and displayed the butts of two revolvers. The cut-purse reached out and took them from the belt.

"I don't know about these," he said, examining the weapons in the light of the fire that burned near by.

"They're not marked, cap'n; thet's why I chose 'em. Thar's a thousand like 'em west ov ther Missouri."

"Perhaps," said Don Frisco slowly. "Some men 'd know ther droppers 'mong a thousand just like 'em. Go back an' git yer own. We'll risk them, Quartzzy."

The man retired with some sullenness and soon came back.

"I'm fixed now, I reckon," he said to Don Frisco as he threw back one of the flaps of his jacket. "Off we ar' now. You know what we're goin' ter Leadville for, I don't. I never ask questions, cap'n."

By this time the two men had the little camp at their back and were riding side by side toward the Denver-Leadville trail which was a short distance to the north.

Scarcely had they left the camp when a figure crept forward with the movements of a panther and kept beyond the bounds of the firelight.

Not a sound announced this person's approach; he had the noiseless movements of the mountain cat.

A pair of eyes sparkling black, and as keen as an eagle's burned in the crawler's head, and when he rose to his feet alongside the rocky wall, his eyes were fastened on the cleft in the stone in which Don Frisco had deposited the letter for the first man to come.

The camp visitor was clad in buckskin and his face was dark, not unlike an Indian's; he wore heavy moccasins instead of boots, hence his soundless steps.

As he straightened along the wall his right hand crept up toward the singular post-office, and the next moment his searching fingers had clutched the message deposited there by Don Frisco.

"Hello! thar!" suddenly rung out a voice from a spot hardly thirty feet away. "Drop thet letter, you infernal thief! Thet's our post-office yer' robbin'!"

With the letter clutched in his hand the robber of the mountain post-office wheeled upon the speaker.

"Throw down thet dockermant!" was the second demand. "By Jehosaphat! we kill thieves. Thet's one ov our rules."

The eyes of the man in buckskin marked the speaker the instant he turned; he saw a big fellow standing by a horse and clutching a revolver in his hand.

"I drop nothin'!" he hissed defiantly, and the next second he sprung away with a quickness that amazed the new-comer.

"I'll shoot it out o' yer fist!" was the response, and the report of a revolver echoed among the crags as the shooter sprung forward after the thief.

If the shot took effect there was no perceptible results, and the enraged marksman after pursuing the letter-stealer some distance came back growling and swearing over his ill-luck.

"Mebbe thet letter war for me," he said and then he searched the rock post-office with his hand, but it was quite empty. "As true as I live! I saw that thief in Leadville. I know it. He is the messenger Calumet Tom sent to Denver. Pawnee they call him. By heavens! I should have shot him without a word. I owe him one. He fetched Denver Duke over the mountains, but I finished his career in ther Grand Colorado. He came from Denver ter drop dead in his boots. Thet's what he got fer obeyin' Calumet's command. Camp empty an' letter stolen! I wonder whar ther cap'n is. Wal. Good-by, Don Frisco. I'll see yer later, but mebbe not fer a long time. Ther lone hand ar' gittin' along all right. I'm gittin' nigh ter ther biggest bonanza in Colorado."

The man was Yuba Dave or Centipede Sam, and he showed eyes full of triumph as he turned away.

He had taken two steps beyond the fire when a voice greeted him suddenly:

"War thet your shot, Centipede?"

"Yes," he said recognizing at once the man

who came forward. "Whar's Don Frisco, Mountain Rock?"

"He went ter Denver ther last time he left camp—"

"No."

"Thet's what ther boys said when I came to. Look at thet!" and Mountain Rock put his hand up to his throat. "I've been choked an' lacerated since you left camp."

"Who did it?"

"An Injun in buckskin thet I, fool-like, stopped on ther Denver trail. When I stop another red, Centipede, it'll be with the bullet!"

Yuba Dave said nothing; perhaps he did not think it best to tell Mountain Rock that the man he had missed had purloined a letter from the post-office, but he knew he had to give some account of the pistol-shot and so he said:

"I shot at thet tailless coyote we've seen a dozen times. I wish he hed been ther red thet choked yer, Rock."

"I don't! I want ter settle with him myself," was the answer. "We'll make ourselves comfortable till Don Frisco comes back."

"All right. I'll go an' get my hoss."

Yuba Dave left Mountain Rock alone and stole down the trail.

"Ten ter one I shot at ther Injun thet choked Mountain Rock," he mused with a slight chuckle. "He went ter Denver fer Calumet, an' he's on his way back now. I hope you'll all hev gay times while I'm gone. Tal! tal! Mountain Rock. Ef we never meet ag'in take keer ov yerself an' steer clear ov Injuns in buckskin; they're reg'lar steel-traps ef ther one in Leadville is a sample."

A short distance from the camp and not far from the main trail between the rival Colorado cities Yuba Dave found a large rock at one side of the road and stooped over it.

When he rose again he held a number of papers in his hand and these he thrust into his bosom, buttoning his jacket tightly over them, and then walked on.

Almost suddenly a few steps further on he came upon two horses, on one of which was seated a young girl who regarded him with a questioning look as he came up.

"I found nobody at home, but ther route is cl'ar," he said as he sprung to saddle and turned to the girl. "We'll get at something satisfactory by daylight."

"I hope so. I am eager," was the answer.

"You have visited Don Frisco's camp?"

"If I hev it war in yer cause, girl," the man said. "You know what's fetched you from Leadville!"

"I do not forget it for a moment. Dare you promise me that we will find a clew by daylight?"

"I hope so."

"Promise it. Not a step without the promise."

Yuba Dave looked at the speaker and clinched his teeth.

"Wal, I promise. I'll swear it ef necessary. Come on!" And the two horses struck the main trail and were soon galloping toward Denver.

Leadville Lucy was still deceived.

CHAPTER X.

STARTLING TIDINGS.

LEADVILLE, at the period of which we write, was no mean rival to Denver in point of richness and excitement. Silver had been discovered in quantities fabulous enough to tempt the most incredulous, and some of the leads opened had eclipsed in richness Denver's famous "Lone Cabin" and "Tiger Lily."

Around the new mines of Leadville a town of no insignificant proportions had sprung into being. Men desperadoes, adventurers, and sports of all kinds had flocked to Leadville from every quarter, and it had grown into a city of roughs and toughs with hardly one redeeming quality.

Such are nearly all the places that grow up among the gold and silver fields of the great West, and, of course, Leadville could not well be an exception.

Its population was so incongruous that strangers coming in were not noticed unless they distinguished themselves by some feat with the revolver, or great losses or winnings at the monte tables, and after a week's sojourn they had passed to other towns and to other sports.

Don Frisco knew Leadville even better than the man at his side suspected. He had spent much of his life among the mushroom "cities" of the gold border, and they are all alike.

Yet, it was extremely hazardous for him to ride into Leadville fresh from his peculiar ground among the mountains where he had carried on his highway robberies until a dozen towns had set a price on his body, dead or alive. He had robbed without distinction, had stripped the miner, the sport, and the tourist, and the more delicate purse of woman had been tossed from the stage at his feet.

During all these transactions he had appeared *en mask* on the trail, but now he had cast the silken covering aside with the intention of invading Leadville, the walls of whose buildings were placarded with offers of reward for his head.

Don Frisco was anxious to know what had

taken Denver Duke so suddenly from Denver to Leadville. He had failed, as we know, to overtake the young sport among the mountains, and he had resolved to discover the purport of his mission.

Had they ever met before? Did Don Frisco suspect that he was the cause of Denver Duke's night ride? We shall see.

Nobody seemed to notice the arrival of the Colorado Cut-purse in Leadville; he entered the city of the Silver Hills attended by Quartz, on whose loyalty he had depended for years, and a shrewd, homely and desperate man.

A few rods from the first shanty that greeted them the two men separated, and Don Frisco rode straight ahead.

The night was well spent, but some of the all-night gambling dens were open and seemed to be doing a "land-office" business.

The mountain cut-purse heard the loud voices that emanated from these places as he rode along, and at last having selected a certain one, he dismounted and went in.

He struck just the kind of interior he expected to find, a large room with rough weather-boarded walls, two dozen tables, benches for seats, and a floor covered with sawdust and tobacco spit. The den had twenty counterparts in Leadville at the time, and delectable places they were, to be sure.

A rather high counter was visible in one corner of the room, and over it back among the long-necked black bottles Don Frisco saw something that brought a faint smile to the corners of his mouth.

This object was a rough print of the head and shoulders of a man, the former adorned with a big sombrero and the upper part of the face concealed by a black mask which reached to the mouth. Above the hat, *a la halo*, was the legend "stand and deliver!" and below the bust the following:

"ATTENTION! \$500 REWARD!
LEADVILLE PAYS THIS SUM
FOR DON FRISCO,
DEAD OR ALIVE.—\$500."

The letters were large enough to be easily read from any part of the house, and the swift glance sent toward the poster told the Colorado road-agent that it was similar to others scattered among the mining-towns.

"I'm right among the tigers," he mused as he walked boldly to the counter and coolly ordered a drink.

A few of the deal tables were occupied at the time, and a little group of men occupied the end of the counter where between the drinks they were discussing the prospects of some new mine.

There was nothing in Don Frisco's appearance to excite suspicion; he looked like some well-to-do prospector, or a successful mine-owner who had stepped in for the last drink ere going to bed, and the inmates of the place gave him no more than a passing glance.

He finished his whisky quickly, threw the bartender a gold piece and was about to turn away with the change when a man sprung up from one of the card-tables with a loud oath which attracted momentary attention.

"By Jupiter! ef I had Fortune hyer, I'd knife her!" ejaculated this individual savagely as he came toward the bar. "Three nights in succession an' not a winnin' hand! Ther accursed pasteboards burn my fingers; they're hotter than Poker Phil's whisky which I'll try for a soother! Toss'er out, Phil—ther blazin'est stuff in yer employ!"

The speaker had halted alongside of Don Frisco and their elbows touched.

"Go over thar an' make my hand win, stranger," he went on, turning to the cut-purse while Poker Phil was searching for his hottest liquor. "Ther cards may pan out well for you; but they're no good ter Amazon Alf, which ar' me. Try 'em awhile—jest for luck!"

Don Frisco threw a quick glance toward the three men just deserted by the broken gambler, and caught the eyes of two of them.

"Thar's a seat hyer—Amazon's place ef yer want it," called out one of the men. "It doesn't cost much ter play."

"No, but all a fellar's got ef he stays with it awhile," growled Amazon Alf, and then he added aloud to Don Frisco: "Go over thar an' bu'st ther hull lay-out, pard. Ye've got vict'ry in yer eyes. I see it thar. Drink with me, an' then lay them three card-sharks out."

Don Frisco refused the proffered treat with a wave of the hand, and walked toward the table.

When he halted he looked down into the faces of three men who seemed anxious for him to join the game just left by Amazon Alf who had not fared well at the hands of fortune. One moved aside to give him a seat on the bench, and Don Frisco soon had a hand in the play.

"Salt'em, cap'n; salt'em good," said Amazon Alf who having finished his liquor, had come back to the table and now stood at Don Frisco's shoulder glancing down on the "hand" he held.

"Ther boys play fair enough, but it's fortune thet went back on this chick. I'd knife'er ef I had ther chance."

"Three nights in succession warn't it, Amazon?" laughed one of the players.

"Three! From sundown till sunrise. No stoppin', Monte."

"Save only when we went ter see ther dead passenger Whiplash George fetched from Denver. Did yer see him, cap'n?"

"No," said Don Frisco to whom the question was addressed.

"It was a strange go. Ther inquest got nothin' like inquests always do. We thought we hed a clew when the chap called Centipede Sam by Calumet Tom brought in ther dead man's valise."

The mention of Centipede Sam seemed to surprise Don Frisco, but he did not start.

What! his right bower, Centipede Sam, mixed up in a Leadville sensation?

He wondered whether the fellow was still in town, but he did not inquire.

"Calumet missed it on thet pard, eh, Monte?" laughed Amazon Alf. "Yuba Dave never stirred when he war called Centipede. It war a mistake. Calumet looked like he could hev crawled inter a gopher's den. Thar! ye hit it thet time, cap'n. It's yer pile. Fortune smiles on you, but nary a smile for Amazon."

As Don Frisco raked in the stakes which his hand had won he became aware of the presence of some one at his left. He had heard no step across the floor, but he knew he was watched by somebody besides Amazon Alf.

As the gambler at his right took the cards to shuffle he ventured to glance up, and to his astonishment saw the face of Quartz, his eyes speaking volumes and his lips seeming ready to fly apart.

"Hyer! take my hand an' my winnin's an' give fortune another bout," he said to Amazon Alf as he got up. "I've played ter give yer a fresh start. Now mebbe ye kin redeem yer lost hands."

"Ef ther boys ar' willin'," said Amazon, glancing at the three sports.

"If ther cap'n *won't* play, come back inter ther ring, Amazon," was the answer, and as Don Frisco backed out the unfortunate sport dropped upon the bench eager to tempt the fickle goddess once more.

Don Frisco turned upon Quartz and gave him a meanful look as he passed toward the door of the den.

Out in the street in the shadow of the horse left in the street by the mountain cut-purse the two men came together.

"You wanted ter tell me something; yer eyes said so," said Don Frisco. "What hev yer discovered?"

"A good deal. Centipede Sam has been hyer. He's playin' some kind ov a deep game—another ov his famous lone hands."

"Wal?"

Denver Duke came in from ther town toward ther east, met a chap called Calumet Tom, an' went ter the Grand Colorado whar they hed been holdin Centipede under guard an' got shot by somebody on ther outside."

"By Centipede?" ejaculated Don Frisco.

"Sartainly."

"An' killed?"

"No. Luck war with Denver Duke. Ther winder-pane saved him. Arter that, Centipede Sam left town, but not alone."

"Who went with him?"

"Ther boss girl ov ther ranch—ther Queen ov Leadville—Leadville Lucy!"

Don Frisco uttered an ejaculation of amazement.

"Hush! not a word—not a whisper," said Quartz, clutching the road-agent's wrist. "Look at ther man in ther light ov yon s'loon lamp. It's ther Leadville red—ther Injun in buckskin what choked Mountain Rock!"

Don Frisco looked carefully without exciting any suspicion and saw the individual described by his pard.

He was no other than Pawnee, the Indian, and if Don Frisco knew the purport of the paper he carried in one of the inner pockets of his buckskin garment, he would have taken immediate action.

"Another lone hand by Centipede, eh?" grated Don Frisco, turning from the Indian, who disappeared in the all-night ranch before which he had been seen for a moment. "I told him once that if he ever played another I'd turn on him. An' I will! Gone off with a girl, ha! Quartz, thar's new work for us. We'll find out what fetched Denver Duke from Denver an' then hunt Centipede down. To-morrow night, perhaps!"

At the same time the Indian in buckskin placed a piece of paper into the big bronze hand of a man he found in the saloon. The paper was unfolded, glanced at, and then—an exclamation of surprise.

"Impossible, Pawnee. I'd as soon look for the devil in Leadville. But we'll see."

The speaker was Calumet Tom.

"Whar did yer git this dockermant?" he asked of the astonished Indian.

"I took it from the camp. A man shot at me, but missed me by an inch."

Calumet Tom started toward the door, followed by the red-skin.

Down the street they went and into the Grand Colorado.

Calumet Tom sprung up-stairs, three steps at a time, and laid his hand on the shoulders of a man who was in bed.

"Rings ov Saturn! what d' yer think, Denver?" he cried, as the man started up. "Ther right bower no sooner leaves than ther boss himself comes on ther stage. Git up. Don Frisco himself ar' in Leadville."

"Impossible!"

"I've got ther proof."

Denver Duke was out of bed in an instant.

CHAPTER XI.

ONE AGAINST FOUR.

WALKING slowly away with Quartzzy at his side was Don Frisco, the Colorado Cut-purse, in the place of all places where he was not safe.

"An' so Centipede has been hyer, an' run off with Leadville Lucy?" he said, looking at his companion.

"Thet's it, cap'n."

"How did you find it out?"

"I stumbled onter ther information awhile ago—hit it accidentally."

"You couldn't be mistaken, eh?"

"Not much."

Don Frisco said nothing for a moment, during which time he bit his lip and gazed ahead. If Quartzzy had cast his eyes downward, he would have noticed that his leader had clinched his hands.

If Don Frisco had known that at that moment Calumet Tom was rousing Denver Duke with a piece of very startling information to which his name was coupled, he might have changed his tactics.

The two men were walking down the center of the street, the road-agent's horse following behind, his nostrils at Don Frisco's elbow.

"Whar's yer hoss?" suddenly asked the cut-purse captain of his companion.

"Close, whar I kin lay hands on him in a minute. Must I get him?"

"Yes."

"Ar' we goin' away?"

"You ar', Quartzzy."

"Then I'll get Fastfoot." And the highwayman's pard started off, and was soon out of sight.

Don Frisco had reached a point not far from Colonel Starbottle's well-known hostelry, and leaning against his steed he took a note-book from an inner pocket.

"Pshaw! I won't," he said. "Letters ar' not as safe as a tongue sometimes. I'll send a verbal message by Quartzzy. What? hyer a'ready?"

"Hyer I am, cap'n," and the burly figure of the road-agent's pard, followed by a horse, appeared before him. "What's ther orders?"

"You go back ter camp. Mountain Rock or Brown Jack may be thar—I don't expect yer ter hear ov Centipede comin' back under ther circumstances. Say ter ther pards thet Centipede's ter be found—d'yer hear it, Quartzzy?—found!—ef Colorado's ter be scraped. Tell ther boys ter look out for him—no stage-watchin' now. Eyes open; triggers easily set."

Quartzzy bowed.

"An' you, cap'n?"

"Oh, I'm liable ter turn up any time an' anywhere arter to-morrow. I stay hyer; business! They don't dream thet I'm in Leadville, though I see my portrait wharever I go, ha! ha!"

The robber's pard put one foot into the stirrup and vaulted upon the steed's back; then with a laugh said: "Off I am, cap'n," in low tones, and rode away, leaving Don Frisco to stem the tide alone in Leadville.

Quartzzy was watched until he had passed out of sight; then the mountain cut-purse turned back toward Poker Phil's place which was still open, as he could see by the light burning in a smoky transparency in front of the door.

"There would be fun if Leadville knew her visitor," he chuckled to himself. "A whisper thet I war in town would set the whole place off like a powder magazine. I'd have all Leadville ter fight an' thar'd be somebody killed. But nobody suspects, an' when I'm gone I'll send 'em word ter say thet I inspected ther burg an' hed a quiet good time generally. They don't want ter find me out—not much, my silver hollyhocks ov Colorado. Wake Don Frisco up an' hev a bull in yer mountain china-shop thet'll not leave a whole plate on a shelf!"

He kept on down the street until nearly opposite Poker Phil's.

There was something thrilling in the coolness of this man who had come from his mountain ground into the very lion's den. On every side were offers of money for his head, yet he walked calmly down the street, and even chuckled to think what blood would flow if he should be unmasked by some chance almost entirely unexpected.

Don Frisco stopped in front of Poker Phil's and listened for a moment to the voices that came from the inside. He seemed to hear an ejaculation in Amazon Alf's harsh tones; fortune had probably played the fellow false again.

"Let 'em play," he suddenly said. "I'm hyer for information, not ter shuffle with men who'd play with revolvers instead ov cards if they knew who I am. I'll go back to ther Colorado an' put up. To-morrow I'll know what brought

Denver Duke, ther Dandy hyer; an' afore to-morrow night I'll strike Centipede Sam's trail."

At that moment two men, followed by an Indian in buckskin, emerged from the hotel and paused for a moment in the clear and cool morning starlight.

"We'd hev a time if we roused ther woman," said one of the three.

"A time an' blood!" was the reply. "What fetched Don Frisco to Leadville?"

"Heaven knows, Denver Duke. It's past my guessin'. But ther paper Pawnee filched from his camp tells he's hyer. He had ther start ov Pawnee, an' ther trail is straight. I could walk out inter ther street thar an' yell 'Don Frisco!' once an' hev all Leadville up in five minutes. No; we don't want to tell Keno Kate. She'd spile ther hull game, an' then, she an' me ain't on the best o' terms. What do yer say, Pawnee? Whar shall we look for this Rocky Mountain Scorpion?"

"Among the monte dens," answered the Indian.

"Come, then. We'll rake 'em with a fine-tooth comb but what we'll find him."

In another moment Calumet Tom would have led the little party away if the hand of the Indian had not closed on his arm.

"Hark, Calumet! A horse on the street!"

The ears of Calumet Tom and Denver Duke caught the sounds the moment the red-skin spoke, and turning around, they waited breathlessly for the advancing person.

"Back!" whispered the Denverite. "He is approaching the hotel. A late guest, I should say."

The three men slunk toward the building where the shadows were densest, and watched objects in the street, each man with a hand resting on the butt of his revolver.

They saw now that a man, tall and well-proportioned, was walking at the horse's head. He had left the middle of the street, and was shaping his course toward the hotel.

The uncertain light of the hour just before day quite hid the figures of Calumet and Pawnee. He saw them not, though their eyes were fastened upon him, and he said aloud, as he struck the graveled sidewalk and parted company with his steed:

"An hour's sleep'll fit me for to-morrow's business. I'm ready ter paint Leadville red if they unmask me!"

The three men started at once.

"Don Frisco!" ejaculated Denver Duke.

There was no doubt of it; the words betrayed him if his magnificent figure did not, and so near was he to the watchful trio that their hands could almost have touched him.

"Cover him!" whispered the Denverite.

"All three ov us!" answered Calumet Tom. "Now!"

Up went three revolvers as if impelled by one arm alone, but before Calumet could step forward or utter a word, the door of the hotel flew open and a revolver's click was heard as a figure alighted on the sidewalk.

"We meet at last, Don Frisco!" cried a stern voice. "Fool you are, to come to Leadville. Why didn't you keep to the mountains? Touch your weapons and I'll end your career where you stand."

The voice, the apparition which was that of a woman and the uplifted revolver forced the Colorado Cut-purse to the edge of the sidewalk.

"In the name of hades, whar did you come from?" he cried, gazing at the woman.

"Ha! you know me!" was the answer. "Keno Kate once—no! I'll not speak the name which has become accursed. I saw you the other day in Denver, but for a moment. Walk out into the street—past your horse—and throw up your hands. You might ask mercy of the hands of the pards of Leadville, but not of me. Back!—Don Frisco—back!"

The road-agent looked into the woman's eyes that gleamed behind the leveled weapon; there was no mercy there.

"Kate, is thar no compromise?" he asked, temptingly.

"With you?—none! I am going to shoot you dead on the streets of Leadville!"

"I guess not. I'll take a hand in this game," said the voice of a man, and Calumet Tom sprang forward and laid his hand on the woman's arm.

"You—the man who took up my cause years ago and did not fight it out?" and Keno Kate jerked herself loose from the old miner's grip. "By the mercy, Calumet Tom, I'll kill you, too, if you interfere in this long-sought vengeance."

She had broken entirely loose from the miner's clutch, and sprang, tiger-like, at the Colorado Cut-purse.

"Check her thar!" cried Calumet Tom, grasping madly at her.

Pawnee, the red pard, leaped forward, but failed to detain her.

"This is my blow, Don Frisco!" exclaimed Keno Kate, thrusting her revolver into the road-agent's very face.

"Not yet, my beautiful she viper!"

Down came Don Frisco's right hand on the woman's wrist, and closing there he shook the revolver loose and lifted her from the ground.

"Gentlemen, this is a double game, you see—worse than the lone ones Centipede sometimes plays. If this woman's life is nothin' ter you, shoot through her to me!"

The three men stopped and their weapons seemed to drop below their eyes, for Don Frisco was holding Keno Kate before them, a beautiful shield for his body.

The cut-purse king had gained the upper hand in a second of time!

CHAPTER XII.

AT HIS OLD TRICKS.

DON FRISCO sent his defiance at the startled crowd from between clinched teeth; the three men saw his eyes snap.

Speaking the last sentence, he backed slowly toward his horse, taking good care to keep Keno Kate held between him and the revolvers of Calumet Tom and his pards.

It was useless for the woman to struggle; she was powerless in the clutch of the mountain bandit.

He reached his horse, and stood for a moment at the animal's head.

"We'll meet again, probably, gents," he said. "You did not expect ter see Don Frisco in Leadville ter-night? Oh, no! I had intended ter stay till mornin', but circumstances take me away. So, Centipede has played one o' his lone hands on ye?"

"Who told yer?" blurted Calumet Tom.

"No difference who, gents. Centipede's famous for lone hands, an' he plays 'em well, too. Ta, ta, my Silver Hills daisies! I'll take this lady with me; I want ter see her in private."

Don Frisco stepped around his steed, thus shielding his body from view, and a moment later the animal moved off, with the road-agent keeping step alongside.

"Euchered, by Jupiter!" ejaculated Calumet, the first of the astonished three to speak. "I've heard ov cool tricks afore, but thet one walks off with all ther red kerds. An' Keno Kate—she's tumbled inter ther worst hands, for her, in all ther world."

"Follow him and rescue her," said Denver Duke. "I say, baffle this tiger of the mountain trail!"

"Pawnee says so, too," spoke the Indian in buckskin.

"Yonder he goes, gents, an' with him is Keno Kate."

"Come, then!" exclaimed the Denverite.

"The trail is hot," said the Indian.

As for Calumet Tom, he did not move, but stood erect pointing down the street which Don Frisco was soon to leave for the mountain paths.

"What, Calumet! won't you help rescue that woman?" cried Denver Duke, in amazement.

"Not now. What did she say to me last night?" answered the old man, almost fiercely. "You heard her, Denver, for ther door between us war open. Didn't she accuse me ov betrayin' her—ov breakin' a sacred oath? Thet's ther way it strikes this chick just now. Rescue her?—Calumet Tom? Not now, gents! I'm a traitor, yer see—an oath-breaker!"

The hand of the speaker fell slowly to his side, and he turned away.

"But that man is Don Frisco!" persisted Denver Duke. "My God! can you stand there and forget what he has done? The Colorado Cut-purse walks coolly away with a human prize, and you—Calumet Tom, of Leadville—let him go!"

"Yes; the woman came in between. She made it her fight when it was ours. Now, let it remain hers. I'm done!"

Denver Duke bit his lip under his drooping mustache and turned toward the Indian. He saw that Pawnee was glaring after Don Frisco with the fierceness of a tiger. It would take but a word—a look—to throw the Leadville red-skin upon the road-agent's trail.

"Very well," said Denver Duke at last, looking at Calumet. "You say it is not your fight. I'm goin' to make it mine."

"Take up Keno Kate's cause?" was the retort.

"I don't have to do that."

"If you do you wouldn't get thanked for it, and mebbe 'd get a bullet through yer head."

"From Don Frisco?"

"From Don Frisco."

"That settles it!"

"All right," said Calumet Tom with a smile. "Foller Don Frisco an' leave Lucy in ther clutches ov Centipede Sam. Thet's no way ter get at ther bottom ov ther mystery thet enshrouds ther papers stolen from Victor's valise. I say ag'in, Denver, thet them papers ar' worth twice their weight in diamonds. I sent ter Denver fer ye—ter keep me on this Centipede Sam bizness—not ter champion another woman's cause an' ter hunt Don Frisco. Take yer choice, young man. Thar's ther trail."

Although Denver Duke's "that settles it" had been spoken with much determination, Calumet Tom's last words seemed to change his mind.

He looked down the road taken by Don Frisco and hesitated; he halted between two women as it were.

"I won't go back on my word," he said speaking suddenly. "She may not thank me, but I'll

make one play for her safety, anyhow. You will stand by me, Pawnee?"

"As the big oak stands by its brother in the forest!"

"Come, then. We'll get out the horses and give this mountain Jack Sheppard a sample of Colorado retribution."

Calumet Tom and Denver Duke's eyes met, while the young sport spoke, but not a word was exchanged, and Denver and Pawnee moved away.

"I didn't think he'd do it," muttered the old miner, watching the Denverite. "Can it be that he thinks not much of Leadville Lucy? It looks that way when a woman like Keno Kate leads him off. All right, Denver; rescue the woman I served once, and find her out when it is too late to come back to Lucy. I'll get on Centipede Sam without yer assistance." And he walked off in a brown study and straight to Poker Phil's where six big men were taking the last drink prior to adjourning for the present.

"Ho! ho! that's right, daisies ov Leadville!" laughed Calumet Tom as his burly figure appeared in the doorway and his eyes took in the layout at the bar. "Toss off yer p'isen with Don Frisco just leavin' town with a hull hide."

The big six turned to Calumet with an expression perfectly indescribable.

"What kind ov a gale is that ye'r givin' us?" cried one.

"A truthful zephyr, my silver infants. Ther original ov thet picter over ther bar has just left Leadville. Mebbe he war in hyer an' tossed kerds with yer."

"By heavens! ther stranger what took my hand an' won by it!" ejaculated Amazon Alf returning his glass to the counter with an emphasis that endangered its existence. "Didn't he go off with a pard what came in an' said nothin'! Don Frisco! Jehosaphat! An' thet reward over Phil's counter all ther time!"

The six men looked up at the rather fanciful portrait of Don Frisco and ground their teeth.

It was galling to think that the mountain bandit had been there, had even played with them and had walked off with the audacity of Satan himself and with the reward offered for his head within arms' length.

"An' he war hyer?" ejaculated several of the big men simultaneously.

"I saw him!"

"An' didn't take in thet five hundred."

"It seems not," said Calumet with a smile. "I left him for Leadville ter hunt down."

"Wal, I'm Leadville when it comes ter thet!" cried Amazon Alf. "You let Don Frisco go. I will not. Thet five hundred will give this silver posey a lift thet 'll make fortune dance when he plays. Set out yer p'isen bottle, Phil. Hyer's ter ther death ov Don Frisco!"

Amazon Alf did not wait for his companions to fill their own glasses, but tossed off the liquor he had poured out, and started toward the door.

"Success ter yer, Amazon!" cried out Poker Phil.

"I'll deserve it!" called out the Leadviller. "By ther nine gods! I'll scoop thet five hundred or—I'm bound ter scoop it!"

In another minute Amazon Alf was gone, but the door had hardly closed on his figure ere it swung wide again, and a fat little man of forty-five, hatless, frightened and out of breath, staggered forward.

"Gimme something—nerves all gone—been stopped—robbed—tore all up—something fiery—hot as Tartarus!" he gasped in exhausted sentences and he made a lunge for the bottle still on the counter.

"Been robbed?" cried Calumet and the five big men in one breath.

"I should remark—wait till I drink; nerves all gone, I tell you!" and the speaker filled the whisky glass to the brim and gulped the fiery contents down.

"Now I'll give you the lay-out," he said, mopping his face with a bandanna handkerchief, the only loose article he appeared to have left. "It happened just out o' town—not a mile back. I war winnin' ther bet, you see, gents; heard of it probably."

"No," said the six attentive listeners.

"Well, I'll tell you. I bet a week ago thet I—Majah Butterball—would ride unattended from Denver to Leadville within twenty days; bet a thousand dollars in cold hard coin. We put the money up, an' now, gents, if steamboats war sellin' in Leadville at ten cents a fleet, I couldn't buy a smokestack. But as I war sayin', I war just gettin' inter Leadville when I war stopped by a man what held a woman afore him on his hoss—"

"Jupiter!" ejaculated Poker Phil. "They'll carry off the houri of this ranch next."

"Go on," said Calumet Tom, almost sternly.

"I war covered before I could draw. I'll swear to that, gents," continued Majah Butterball. "And at his command, with his dropper rammed into my face, I hed ter throw my weapons down, turn my pockets inside out—in short, gents, he made a Lazarus out o' Majah Butterball of Denver, an' lost him the bet."

"But yer hat, major?" ventured one of the men.

"Hat? hat! It's here," and the major put his

hand on his head. "No, by Jupiter! The cut-throat took even thet."

"Don Frisco may hev wanted another hat."

"Thet ruffian Don Frisco?" ejaculated Major Butterball, who seemed for the first time to realize the extent of the peril he had escaped. "Gentlemen, I warn't far from right after all. I called him the devil afore we parted. I hit it, eh? Don Frisco! An' he stopped me—Majah Butterball. Gentlemen, I add one hundred to ther reward for him. My seraph of the sparkling fluid, will you loan a bu'sted individual another drink?"

"Help yourself, major," said Poker Phil, and the gentleman from Denver who was to give Leadville a genuine sensation before he left it, helped himself to the liquor in a manner that plainly indicated his fondness for it.

Daylight was soon to break again over the city of the Silver Hills, and Major Butterball walked his horse toward the Grand Colorado, where he expected to install himself until he could get a remittance from Denver, and Calumet Tom went to his own little shanty.

Amazon Alf had probably taken after Don Frisco who was doubtless hunted by Denver Duke and Pawnee, and Calumet threw himself on a cot under his humble roof.

He could not help laughing at Major Butterball's fright, nor fail to admire the audacity of a man who, with a woman prisoner in his grasp, could stop and rob a fellow-human of revolvers and gold. But it was in keeping with Don Frisco's character.

"Tigress Kate has fallen inter ther arch-tiger's claws. I'd like to see 'em hev it out. By Jupiter! I would!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIV.

KENO KATE'S DOOM.

RIDING down a mountain trail just after daybreak, were Denver Duke and the red in buckskin. The trail was wide enough to admit of their riding side by side, and far above their heads towered the wooded crest of the mountain spur.

They had left Leadville before daylight, and both were eager to come up with Don Frisco and his beautiful prisoner.

Denver Duke had resolved to rescue Keno Kate despite Calumet Tom's estimate of her gratitude, and with Pawnee for a pard, he hoped to accomplish that object within a short time.

They could not be far behind the mountain cut-purse, for they had but to saddle their horses and follow after his departure; but they had missed Major Butterball, who had slipped into Leadville after being plundered by Don Frisco, and had helped himself at Poker Phil's bar.

"Look down yonder," said a handsome man, who pointed down the mountain from his seat in a saddle. "Watch yon open space for a minute—there! two men on horseback."

"I see them," was the reply, spoken by a woman who had intense black eyes.

"They are two of the three men on my trail. They hope to get ahead of Don Frisco, which you also expected to do, eh, Kate?"

"Which I will surely do yet!" hissed the woman, turning from the moving horsemen below to Don Frisco. "You must not trust me too far."

"Be sure that I will not. Come! we move on. I fancy those two persons are Calumet Tom an' his Injun pard. If they come too close they will each get a bullet in their heads. Follow Don Frisco an' fool with dynamite, my Leadville daisies."

Don Frisco had reached a point some miles from Leadville, and although he was far above the town in point of elevation, he could not see it for the wooded slopes that intervened.

More than once, as he rode away with Keno Kate firmly grasped and seated before him, did he glance back and downward over his shoulders. The two horsemen seen for a minute had disappeared, and he saw them no more for all his watchfulness.

The morning crept on apace and the sun came up, but Don Frisco did not reach the camp lately occupied by himself and pards. He must have passed it, for when he halted on a very narrow trail, one side of which was the edge of a gulch wall, he must have been far from it.

Drawing rein suddenly, he slid from the saddle and lifted his captive down before she could anticipate his intentions.

"We stop hyer, Kate," he said in answer to her questioning look. "It is not my camp; oh no. I settle my accounts anywhere."

There was no reply for a moment; Keno Kate gave him a look that made his eyes snap with fiendish delight.

"Let me see; where did I see you last?" he asked. "Was it in Texas?"

"You need not ask me, Don Frisco," said the woman. "Your memory is not treacherous."

Don Frisco smiled.

"No, it is not, but by my soul, woman! I would never have looked for you in the land of the living."

"You thought I were dead?"

"An' hadn't I a right ter think so?"

"Perhaps."

"By Jove, woman, when I saw you last night

back there in Leadville, I thought the dead had come back, but a moment sufficed to dissipate that idea. I saw before me the Queen of Keno, the beautiful dealer whose mad season at San Jose is still the wonder of that mongrel town. No, you haven't forgotten that, Kate."

"I never forget," cried the woman, taking a step toward Don Frisco who stood before her, his splendid figure drawn to its full height and his eyes full of taunts.

"That's clever. I'm glad you remember that episode," he said. "What pigeons we plucked that season, Kate," he went on. "They heard of you, an' they came from all quarters to lose their dust at your shrine. Some yielded gracefully, others with a growl. Among them war the French count who lost his dust, but won something better than gold."

"Enough!" cried Keno Kate, throwing up her hand in a gesture of impatience. "Don't stand there and repeat the perjury that has wrecked my life. You forced me to smile on Count Fijole, as they called him, and when he would not stand your exactions what did you do?"

"Shot the rascal dead!" grated Don Frisco.

"You made me rob him first and then you killed him," ejaculated Keno Kate. "If that was all the crime you committed during the San Jose season you might forget."

"There! don't parade before me the fools of that campaign!" cried the mountain cut-purse. "I have stopped hyer ter make a proposition. I understand you to say, Kate, that you want Don Frisco's blood."

"Who has a better right to shed it than I?" exclaimed Keno Kate. "Duped by you from the first when I was little more than a child, married by one of your pards in surplice and gown, crowned Queen of Keno and forced to pursue a life which seemed to rend my heart-strings, and finally shot from a boat at night on the Rio Grande—who has a better right to shed your blood than the woman who stands before you?"

"Nobody, accordin' ter yer story!" laughed Don Frisco. "My amiable tigress, we couldn't compromise?"

"Never! Vengeance smothers that word in my heart. What! go back to the games I played once for you?"

"Ah, no. I have left the monte tables behind."

"For what?"

"For the road. I am Don Frisco the Cut-purse King of Colorado. These mountains are my kingdom. I rule supreme hyer. I can show you wealth enough to enable me to go ter Frisco—back to the old haunt, Kate—and roll in wealth where we fought for dust. Very well. I did not mean compromise when I mentioned it. I shall never ask you ter go back with me. There shall be another queen in Frisco an' it will not be the Queen of Keno. Now, woman, I have reached the point I've been approachin'. You have sworn that for the past—for the mock marriage, the count's death an' the event on the Rio Grande, I shall die."

Keno Kate's eyes said "yes" but her lips did not move.

"I might object," he went on, laughing cynically. "Indeed, I shall, woman. I am goin' away from this place, but alone. Don Frisco will not be hunted after to-day by the woman who gave San Jose its most excitin' memory."

"That means that I am to die here?"

"Yes! In cold English, Kate, it means that Don Frisco intends to put you forever out of his way."

"With the revolver?"

"Not if you elect otherwise."

Keno Kate fixed her eyes on the silver-mounted revolver that glistened in the road-agent's right hand.

The sternness of a devil gleamed in his eyes; he had the beautiful woman, his victim and his hunter, at his mercy.

"Kate, the wall at your left is straight an' long. I can't say how far it is ter the bottom. I never measured it. For you there is no escape. The bright eyes that fascinated Don Frisco once have lost their power over him. Look! I cover you with my revolver. You look into the barrel an' almost see the ball which is as merciless as Don Frisco himself. I will have no woman on my track. I will not be hunted by Keno Kate. You must die, woman!"

Did the beautiful captive beg?

"All right!—shoot!" fell from her lips. "May the sweet day be suddenly blotted from existence if I beg for a moment's grace at your hands. The Queen of Keno begged once, but it was not for her own life. She scorns to ask for it now."

There was majesty in both the figure and voice of the woman.

"I know you begged for a life once. It was for the count's," he said.

"Yes—for the man you made me rob!" cried Kate bitterly.

"An' the man you loved."

"No; I almost hated the Frenchman. Yet, when you would slay, I begged for him. I would have begged for a dog's life under like circumstances."

The revolver of the road-agent was looking into the woman's face.

"Now, tigress, take your choice," he suddenly cried. "Jump from this trail or receive through your head the ball of the man who will not be tracked!"

Keno Kate threw a quick glance over the edge of the trail; far away she saw the tree-tops clad in the rich foliage of the summer, and over them, like a golden net, the morning sunbeams.

Don Frisco held the revolver with a steady hand; his muscles seemed muscles of steel.

"Jump!" he said coldly. "The wall is straight, I believe. There's nothin' to break your fall, Keno Kate. Death lies at the bottom."

The woman did not move.

"Very well, it shall be a ball in your face!" he cried. "You want that face shattered, I see. It lured more than one fool into the keno trap."

"No! I will not die by your trigger!" suddenly cried the woman. "Better a death a thousand feet below on the rocks than a shattered face by your accursed hand."

"Jump, then! I can't wait hyer all day. Two steps to the left, then—jump!"

Keno Kate stepped to the edge of the trail; Don Frisco did not move.

"When I relent, ther lakes of Hades will freeze!" he said. "I'm Don Frisco now as I war then, Kate; but more a tiger than ever. Jump!"

"Then, may the vengeance of the men behind you be mine as well!" cried the woman. "May the mountains of Colorado soon see their infamous pest food for the buzzards! May Leadville win and the cut-throat lose. Don Frisco, Keno Kate consigns you to the retribution of Heaven. The hour of justice, of vengeance and triumph will not be long delayed."

"Jump!"

Don Frisco took a hasty stride toward Keno Kate as he uttered the command.

She clinched her hands, looked at him a mad farewell that seemed almost capable of killing, and, with nerves strung to their utmost tension, sprung from the trail!

Better a leap into space than a bullet through the head.

Don Frisco stood for a moment in his old tracks with his arm outstretched and the revolver in his hand.

"Out o' my way at last! I've got rid of a tigress who was capable of doin' me much damage. I made her what she is, but I never thought she'd live to invade my mountain kingdom. Good-by Keno Kate. I can now buck ag'n' the lone hand, Centipede Sam, my old pard, is playin', an' if Leadville fights me I will not have you on my track, my discarded viper."

He walked back to his horse as he wound up the last sentence without even glancing once over the edge of the trail to note the awful effects of the woman's leap, and a minute later Don Frisco was riding on at a gallop that took him rapidly over the trail.

After a while he turned into a very narrow road that seemed to run back toward Leadville.

Pursuing it for some time, he drew rein in his old but now deserted camp, and looked around with a disappointed air.

"Mebbe somebody left a letter for me," he said inspecting the cleft in the wall. "Nothin'! Centipede Sam the traitor has not turned up an' Quartzzy, whom I sent from Leadville, is not hyer."

"But somebody else is," said a voice as a man stepped into view. "Hands up! Don Frisco, and answer one question on your oath, or I'll shoot you dead in your stirrups!"

The hand of the cut-purse stopped before it reached his revolver.

He was covered with a Winchester at the shoulder of a handsome young man—Denver Duke.

"Hands up! Now, sir, where is Keno Kate?"

CHAPTER XV.

STARTLING MAGNANIMITY.

"ANSWER that question at yer leisure, cap'n. We've got ther young sharp kivered!"

These words, startling enough they were, too, followed fast upon the heels of Denver Duke's demand.

The young Denverite glanced up from his Winchester for a moment and saw the speaker planted firmly on a rock above Don Frisco's head and with two leveled revolvers. The man was not alone, but beside him stood a big fellow who was similarly armed.

A smile of triumph appeared at the corners of the road-agent's lips the moment the new voice was heard.

He knew the speaker, though he did not lift his eyes to the place where he stood; he knew that Quartzzy, the man sent back from Leadville, covered Denver Duke, and if he had looked, he would have seen Mountain Rock at his side.

"I guess I'll take Quartzzy's advice, eh, Denver Duke?" laughed Don Frisco, as he looked coolly into the barrel of the leveled rifle. "Whar is Keno Kate? Oh! you ar' inquisitive, Denver! What if I should say that that Texan tigress war cut ov harm's way?"

"I might not hesitate to rid Colorado of her meanest cut-purse."

"With ther lay-out behind me?" chuckled the robber. "Quartzzy up thar is famous for keepin' his word."

"Bet yer life, Denver Duke!" cried the deep base of the man with the revolvers. "Let ther trigger ov yers move an' I'll insure ther Colorado vultures a dandy feast. Mebbe ye'd better lower yer shooter; the e droppers are liable ter go off. Be amiable, Denver, in ther mountains as well as in camp."

Denver Duke saw the peril that menaced him; the tables had been turned in a manner and from a source totally unexpected. He had reached the mountain camp a short time prior to Don Frisco's arrival, and fortune had brought the Colorado cut-throat into his power. Keno Kate, his prisoner, was no longer in his grasp, and Denver Duke had but to cover him and force from him at the trigger's menace, the whereabouts or the fate of the beautiful avenger.

All this looked feasible, and the Denver sport was carrying out his game when he was surprised by Quartzzy and Mountain Rock, at whose merciless triggers his own life now hung.

"Drop yer gun, Denver," repeated Quartzzy, in tones a little sterner than those first used. "Count five, Rock, an' count fast, too!"

Denver Duke was no fool; he did not wait for the first numeral, but lowered his Winchester, and bit his lip under his jet mustache.

"I'm in the furnace now; I am Don Frisco's captive," he murmured. "Pawnee, when he comes up, may fall into a trap. My life seems to hang on the adroitness of the Indian in buckskin."

One of the two pards on the rock above the trail kept his place, while the other Mountain Rock came forward, eying Denver Duke sharply, and keeping his dark fingers at the triggers of a brace of six-shooters.

"Droppers to the ground!" he commanded, approaching Denver Duke, who sullenly complied, and in another minute he was in Don Frisco's hands.

"Shall we make a target ov him, cap'n?" asked Quartzzy, coming up.

"No," and Don Frisco continued in a laughing strain as he turned to the Denver sport: "I am not so black as I am painted. Mountain force-purse though I am, I can spare a human life as well as take one. We ought to be friends, Denver Duke—not pards, for that we can never be. You followed me from Leadville. I expected it, an' I war not disappointed. You are alone now, so far as I can see. Awhile ago you had a companion. I saw you windin' up the mountain trail. Calumet went back, mebbe?"

"I am alone, as you see," said Denver Duke.

"You were waitin' for me in the old camp."

"Not exactly that. You came just as I thought of quittin' it."

"An' if I hadn't got in when I did, we would not hev met, eh? Then, by Jove! Denver, I'm glad I did not miss you. Make yerself at home. No bonds—only a display of good sense which I know you possess."

The two pards of Don Frisco looked at him with amazement.

They saw their chief lean against a rock near the young Denverite, and speak with a tenderness they had seldom heard him make use of.

All at once Don Frisco turned away and confronted Quartzzy, whom he addressed in tones too low to reach Denver Duke.

"What news ov Centipede?" he inquired anxiously.

"He war hyer."

"When?"

"Shortly arter you an' I left Leadville."

"Who saw him?"

"Mountain Rock."

"An' he went off ag'in?"

"Yes."

"Curse his lone hand!" Don Frisco growled.

"He went off with the most famous woman in these parts—Leadville Lucy. What did I tell him that night on the Gold Bee?"

"I'll never forget it. You told him, cap'n, that if he ever played another of his lone hands, you'd take it with the trigger."

"An' he—"

"He swore then an' thar that that hand war his last."

"He did! He has broken his oath, though—broken an oath made to Don Frisco. Mebbe ther temptation overcame him. I hev never seen this Leadville rose—I never saw Lucy. But, by heavens! Centipede Sam did not have ter yield. Thar's more behind his lone hand than that girl."

"I know it," said Mountain Rock. "One week ago he laid his hand on my arm an' said that he war trackin' down ther biggest bonanza Colorado held. He said a woman war goin' ter put it inter his hands—"

"He did?"

"Yes."

Don Frisco looked away for a moment, and then walked suddenly to where Denver Duke stood.

"Come with me, Denver," he said, looking up into the face of the young sport. "Thar's a tiger in my heart, but not for you."

The two pards saw Don Frisco lead the Den-

verite from camp, and turn a bend in the trail which hid both from sight, but they dared not follow.

"Now let me talk," said the cut-purse, halting and facing the astonished sport. "You are not my prisoner any longer. Denver Duke, thar runs ther trail to Leadville. Take it an' go back to Calumet. Your weapons will be fetched to you, an' your horse shall be yours still. Go home without seekin' ter know what has become ov Keno Kate. I had rights which must be protected. When I turn on my hunters I know no sex. I kill a tigress as quick as a tiger."

Denver Duke could not repress an ejaculation.

"You have killed the woman," he cried.

"The tigress, you mean? I didn't touch her when she died. I will swear it, young man. I merely looked on—that was all!"

Denver Duke was mystified by Don Frisco's words, and waited for the road-agent to explain.

"Now, sir—to Denver or to Leadville; the choice of places lies with you," Don Frisco went on. "I had a curiosity to know the other night what took you across the mountains."

"That is soon told. I went to Leadville to identify a man who called himself Yuba Dave. Calumet called him Centipede Sam."

"An' Calumet war right, eh, Denver Duke?"

"I am certain of it."

"So am I. That man is the genuine Centipede Sam, the Death Spider of Texas—famous for his silent plots an' his lone hands. If he war hyer now, I'd shoot him dead."

"Your right bower, ca tain?" exclaimed the Denverite.

"My right bower!" was the sternly spoken echo. "He carried off a prize. Ah! you know it."

"Leadville Lucy went away with him."

"Of her own accord?"

"I cannot think so."

Don Frisco was silent for a moment.

"Ah! look yonder!" he suddenly exclaimed pointing down the mountain. "Do you see that man moving from rock to rock?"

Denver Duke caught a glimpse of a dark object moving as Don Frisco indicated, and thought he recognized it.

"Your friend," observed Don Frisco with a smile. "It is the Indian in buckskin."

The Denverite did not confirm the charge.

"Go down an' join him," continued the mountain bandit. "We'll go back an' get your weapons. I'll be a dead hand soon after I strike his trail. When will I get back to Leadville? Oh, some ov these days. I sent Major Butterball moneyless inter town last night. His risin' hair cost him a hat! ha, ha! Hyer's ther camp, an' yer weapons. Say in Leadville that Don Frisco kin treat a prisoner white when he wants ter. An' ef they ask about Keno Kate, say yer don't know."

Denver Duke stood before the Colorado bandit too surprised to speak. His rifle and revolvers had been returned to him, and he was free to walk away.

Scowling with faces doubly dark the two pards stood near by and watched Denver Duke as he turned away.

"It's a bad move, cap'n," blurted Mountain Rock.

"Who runs this camp? Who's head devil hyer?" roared Don Frisco, whirling upon the speaker and taking a step toward him. "I spare when I want ter, an' kill when occasion requires. Let him go. By Jupiter! when that Redskin in buckskin choked yer, Mountain Rock, he didn't stop yer indiscretion. Now we begin the trail arter ther lone hand."

"Arter Centipede, ther old pard?"

"Yes."

"We'll miss ther big consignment ov silver from Leadville ter Denver. It leaves to-morrow."

"I'll give it a through ticket ter safety," cried Don Frisco. "Do yer know that thar's a mystery about ther man Whiplash George hauled dead inter Leadville t'other night?"

"He war Leadville Lucy's brother, Quartzzy says."

"Thet's not all. I warn't in Leadville long last night, but I know that Victor, as they call 'im, had a valise full ov important papers. Centipede Sam brought thet valise ter ther inquest, but it war empty. Who got ther papers, an' what war they?"

"Thet's yer conundrum, cap'n," said Mountain Rock.

"An' it's one ther captain's goin' ter solve! D'yer hear thet, Mountain? Let Denver Duke go; let ther silver consignment go. We hunt Centipede Sam!"

"He went toward Denver."

"Ter Denver, then?"

"He may stop thar."

"Not he—not with ther hand he is playin' now. I will find this traitor; I'll tear ter flinders ther web ov ther Texas spider—I'll make it ther last ov his weavin'. Git yer horses ready! All Leadville may be on our track by night, an' afore this game is played out we may hev Denver thar, too!"

The next minute Don Frisco had vaulted to

saddle, and Mountain Rock and Quartz walked sullenly away after their own steeds.

"What do we keef fer ther dead man's papers?" growled Rock. "Let Centipede play his lone hand out."

"So say I. At ther cap'n's command, we must leave ther silver consignment—"

"No, not this Rocky Mountain chick," growled Mountain Rock. "Choked by an Indian an' cussed by Don Frisco, I'm goin' ter hev my way for once!"

"What d'yer mean?"

"That silver bonanza that leaves Leadville to-morrow!"

"We can't go back on ther cap'n."

"I'd go back on paradise fer the shinin' bars! Keep yer eyes an' ears open an' watch me. That white bonanza must never git ter Denver!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A DEVIL TURNED SAINT.

A BRILLIANT moon round and full hung over Denver, silvering its many roof-tops and lighting up its tortuous streets.

Leadville's rival was a place of note, larger than the wild capital of the Silver Hills, but, like it, a resort for adventurers and a half-way stopping-place, as it were, to the new-found bonanzas of Colorado.

Nobody, on the night in question, seemed to take note of the rather brigandish-looking man who suddenly turned a corner and darted into one of the numerous hotels found at that time in the city.

He was not unlike scores of men seen every day on the streets of Denver, though he looked somewhat striking in his big hat, high boots and loose jacket—a man of the mountains, beyond all doubt.

He spoke to nobody in the well-thronged reception-room of the Denver hotel, but passed through it and went up-stairs to a room on the second floor, the only window of which commanded a view of a portion of Denver's "Broadway."

"I'll go deep into ther prizes now," this man said, drawing a chair up to a small round table and lighting a tin lamp. "The girl's asleep, still most beautifully hoodwinked, an' I've some time on my hands. To-morrow south, an' then west on ther richest trail a galoot ov my make-up ever struck. Oh, when I play a lone hand I play it through, an' I always win."

The man at the table dived beneath the bosom of the darkish shirt he wore, and produced a number of papers tied together, which he deposited on the table in the light of the lamp.

Then, with his back to the door through which he had entered the little room, he fell to work examining the papers one by one.

"Jehui! it's bigger than I thought," he ejaculated more than once, as he went through the documents, some of which were legal papers which no one would have supposed that desperate rough was capable of understanding. "I'm no lawyer, but I'm no fool," he went on. "I can't see through a stone wall, but I get a good hold on some things as I go 'long. I didn't run inter this game blind, though I did start on a rumor. What a lone hand! What'd Don Frisco say ef he could see it?" And the man chuckled to himself.

"Thar's jist this about it," he continued. "If I kin keep Leadville Lucy's suspicions down I kin git through with ther hand I hold. She's quiet enough now, because she's asleep. Kin I start 'er west to-morrow—kin I make her b'lieve that I've struck ther trail ov ther man what killed Victor thet night in George's stago? Ther time has not come for me ter play open ther hand I can't show up now. Jehosaphat! what's this?"

The man who was our old acquaintance, Centipede Sam, picked up a small piece of paper which had dropped from one of the larger documents he had just unfolded, and his eyes were soon devouring its contents.

"Hol! it's a link I want!" he exclaimed. "It establishes ther fact that Victor an' Lucy war brother an' sister. Thar's no doubtin' it now. Thar must be a will o' some kind somewhar among this mess. Mobbe it's in hyer!" and he picked up a number of papers tied in a packet by themselves, and broke the faded ribbons.

For five minutes the man was oblivious to everything save the papers which he examined with the greed of the gold-hunter.

"Eureka! by Jove!" burst suddenly from his lips, as his fingers clutched a piece of paper on which his eyes were riveted. "I thought it war hyer, somewhar! This paper makes yer worth ten times yer weight in gold ter Centipede Sam, Leadville Lucy! It's ther will—half ter Victor, half ter you—but all ter you now, girl, for thar's no Victor, any more."

Centipede Sam saw only the paper before him. His eyes burned in their sockets as he mastered line by line and went on to the end. He looked like a man who had just discovered a veritable bonanza—as he indeed had if things went his way.

Half an hour later he tied the papers up as they were when he took them from his bosom, and blew out the lamp.

"I'll take a drink on the prospect!" he ejaculated in triumph, as he went down-stairs and

swung his burly figure through the bar-room door.

The prospect ahead—the success of his famous lone hand—had made this man bold; if he had marched into Leadville where his blood was wanted, why fear to drink at a Denver bar?

Centipede Sam ordered whisky and drank it off with more than his usual gusto, then laughed to himself as he passed out.

"Take in my anatomy ter yer heart's content, pards ov Denver. I'm a figure worth pluckin' ef yer only knew it. I'm ther biggest bonanza that ever walked—a reg'lar diamond mine, my Denver darlings."

The loafers in the bar-room did not hear the Death Spider's remarks as he passed from the place and sauntered out upon the street, where he stood for a moment in the soft moonlight before he started off.

"I told Rube thet I'd hunt 'im up ef I ever got ter Denver," he said, walking toward the western suburbs of the silver city. "I hev'n't seen him fer three years, but I'll know his shanty from what he's told me ov it. Rube's missed a lot ov fun by leavin' our gang an' settlin' down with his bonanza in Denver; but many's ther points he's sent us about passengers for Leadville, about silver consignments, rich stage-loads, and all that. I might pass myself off on Rube as Yuba Dave, but he'd see through ther game in a little while. I'll play fair with ther old pard; he's played fair with us sence he quit ther camps."

It was a good long walk to the suburbs of the wild western city, for Denver was stretching out toward the far-away gold coast, but Centipede's tramp brought him to a peculiarly constructed house quite unlike its neighbors and the abode of some eccentric person.

"I'd know this shanty among a thousand an' I never saw it aforeter-night; it's Roarin' Rube's palace," said the Death Spider. "I'll give ther old pard a surprise thet'll nearly lift 'im out o' his boots."

If the house was the home of a late and much valued member of Don Frisco's gang, it was an extra building for Denver, and afforded proof enough that its possessor had "struck it rich" at some day, not very far in the past.

Centipede Sam went up to the door and rapped several times with bare knuckles.

"Mobbe ther old chap's out in town somewhar," he ejaculated as his summons remained unanswered.

But no; even while he spoke the door opened, and a big bearded man in dark shirt and slippers—slippers in Denver, reader—confronted Centipede.

"Rube Rattam, eh?" asked Centipede Sam who had drawn his sombrero down so that the broad gray brim shaded his face.

"Thet's my name, sir. Walk in."

The invitation was immediately accepted, and the door closed behind the Death Spider when he had stepped inside.

"Hello! Rube, don't you know an old pard?" exclaimed Centipede Sam wheeling upon Roarin' Rube Rattam.

"Holy Jerusalem! Centipede Sam!" cried Rube, starting back. "In ther name ov heaven, what fetched the Texas Spider ter Denver?"

"Biz'ness, Rube; biz'ness!" was the answer. "I couldn't leave town without droppin' in on you."

"Which war right. But come out inter my other room. I've got suthin' ter show yer."

Rattam led Centipede Sam into a small room lighted by a lamp and pointed to two bills pasted on the wall over a table.

"Ther rewards!" exclaimed Centipede Sam with a laugh. "You've got us side by side, Rube—ther cap'n an' I. Jehui! arn't thar a lot o' men in Colorado who'd like ter rako in ther reward—five hundred for Don Frisco an' five fer yer humble servant, Centipede Sam?"

Roarin' Rube Rattam did not smile.

"There ar' men in Denver to-night who'd delight to kill you an' then spurn the reward."

"No doubt ov thet."

"They'd give half of their fortunes ter tighten a lasso 'round yer neck," Rube Rattam went on. "I could surround you with revolvers in desperate grips by liftin' my hand."

"Ov course you could, Rube. But, you see I know my man before I visit him. Denver is a den o' lions ter me. An' it would be ther same ter you ef ther pards hyer knew thet you war once Don Frisco's pard."

"More than one man knows that, yet I am not molested," was the reply.

"Did they find it out?"

"No; I told 'em."

Centipede Sam gave the speaker an incredulous stare.

"Look me through ef yer want ter, Centipede," he said. "I'm not ther man I war."

"Reformed, eh?"

"Kinder so," answered Rube with a faint smile.

"Great Caesar! thet beats this mountain chick!" cried Centipede. "Whar d'yer dispense Gospel music nowadays? Roarin' Rube Rattam reformed—I can't take it all down at once; it hurts."

The Death Spider essayed to laugh, but the impassive countenance of the man before him

put a sudden check on his hilarity. He was laughing at the pretensions of the wrong individual.

"Hang me, ef I knowed I war runnin' inter a pious trap!" Centipede continued.

"It's not that, sir. I'm no parson, but I am not the Roarin' Rube of Don Frisco's old camps," was the retort. "What's behind me is behind me forever! They say a man can't go back on ther past. It's a lie, Centipede Sam. When yer biz'ness hyer is concluded hadn't you better get out o' Denver?"

"I think I had when Rube Rattam has turned saint."

The bearded lips of the man in slippers met firmly behind the affront.

"Yonder," he said, raising his hand, "yonder is ther door, Centipede Sam!"

The Death Spider gave the speaker a strange, astonished look.

"Yer don't mean it, Rube?" he cried.

"Thar's ther door!" was the answer.

"Fer me?"

"For you!"

Centipede Sam's eyes suddenly flashed resentment, and he stepped back, showing their mad depths to the man who confronted him.

"This is my shanty. I rule hyer," said Rube, continuing.

"Go back ter yer quarters an' leave Denver long before sunrise."

"Which means that ef I don't, you'll set all Denver on Centipede Sam?" growled the Texan. "Try thet, my white-washed wolf! Great Caesar! jest tell Denver that yer old pard—"

"Not another word!" interrupted Rube. "You've laughed in ther face ov ther wrong man, Centipede Sam. My door's behind yer. Go!"

It was a strange tableau, that of the two big men standing face to face in the light of the lamp, the hand of one pointing toward the door, and the other regarding him like a tiger just before a spring.

"All right! if yer say so," said Centipede Sam, madly. "When yer preach let this Rocky Mountain daisy know, an' he'll pose as yer pulpit flower! Good-night. When I git my big bonanza, I'll buy Denver out an' make Saint Rube ther rulin' bishop!"

Centipede Sam ended with a cutting laugh, and then opening the door, he stepped across the threshold.

"Au revoir, Saint Reuben!" he cried, executing a mock bow.

"Good-night, Centipede Sam. Save yer neck by gittin' out ov town!"

The door shut with a bang, and with the miner's words ringing on the night air and thrilling him, Centipede Sam whirled with a tremendous oath.

"By Heavens! he did that ter give me away!" he hoarsely hissed. "He shouted 'Centipede Sam' ter spoil my lone hand. By my soul! I'll riddle his shanty!"

The Death Spider of Texas was in a rage. Whipping out his revolver, he took a step toward the house and sent two bullets through the door.

CHAPTER XVII.

BACK TO HIS VICTIM.

"THAR! that's my challenge! let him come out ef he dares!" growled Centipede Sam, as he lowered the six-shooters and turned and walked away.

The leaden missiles had torn their way through Roarin' Rube's door, making great holes in the wood, and the Texas Spider fancied that he could see the miner's light in the room beyond.

Roarin' Rube's silence was strange and unaccountable, and Centipede Sam reached the hotel without being molested.

"I've got ter git out o' Denver forthwith," he continued, after he had ordered two horses to be made ready for a ride. "I hate ter disturb Lucy—she's probably asleep—but thar's no help for it. I want no fuss, no check hyer—no diffikilty with Rube, ther Saint. Lucy shall be told that I've hit a clew at last; that'll make her willin' ter go. By Jupiter! I war a fool fer wakin' Rube up, but who'd hev thought thet he hed reformed? It'll make Don Frisco laugh when he hears it."

Centipede Sam led the horses to the front of the Denver hostelry and went up-stairs to waken Leadville Lucy.

A light rap on the door of her room elicited no response, and the Texan opened the portal without further ceremony.

The moon was shining into the apartment and its silvery light fell across the bed on which lay the figure of the beautiful queen of Leadville. Centipede Sam looked a moment, and then took a quick stride across the room.

"Lucy," he said, touching her lightly, "we've got ter be travelin'. Ther trail demands it."

The girl had heard his step and was awake.

"The trail?" she echoed. "What have you discovered?"

"Somethin' ter bank on this time, I think."

"A clew?"

"Thet's thar way it looks. I'll wait fer you below; horses saddled an' waitin'. Come down at once." And Centipede Sam left the girl alone and went down-stairs.

It was late, but nobody was on the streets of

Denver. The two horses stood side by side before the hotel, and Centipede Sam placed himself at their heads and began to wait for the girl.

"So far pretty good," he muttered. "The papers indicate a bigger bonanza than I ever dreamed of an' if I lose ther beauty up-stairs, I lose ther hull lay-out an' ther lone hand will amount ter nothin'. She'll be hyer d'rectly an'—ha! thar's ther daisy now."

The last exclamation was uttered just as Leadville Lucy stepped from the building and stood on the sidewalk for a moment.

"Hyar's ther lay-out, girl," spoke Centipede Sam. "By Jove! I war lucky to strike ther clew when I did."

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated the young girl, as she reached the Texan and was touched by his bronzed hand. "Show me the track of the villain who cut Victor down when he was coming to me an' I will thank you all the rest of my life."

She looked deep into the sport's eyes while she spoke, but did not see the cynical smile that played with his lips under his mustache.

"Show yer his trail?" he laughed to himself. "By Jove! Leadville Lucy, you must be blind! I'm no fool if I am from Texas."

Then he was about to assist the girl to one of the saddles when five or six men came round the corner of the hotel and instantly covered him.

"What's up now?" growled Centipede Sam taken completely aback by this unexpected movement. "Woo ter ther galoots who interfere with my lone hand?"

He stepped forward as he finished speaking to himself and halted, away from the horses, and in the bright moonlight—an admirable target for the burly Denverites scarcely ten feet away.

"Wal, gents, what is it?" he asked. "Can't a feller leave Denver when business calls him off?"

"That depends," said the spokesman of the six, a big man in a dark shirt, slouched hat and high boots. "Do yer often shoot through doors an' drop yer fellar-men?"

Centipede Sam started slightly.

What! had he killed Roaring Rube?

"Who's been shootin' through doors?" he demanded with brazen effrontery.

"You—you! One of yer bullets found ther carkiss ov a man thet all Denver respects."

"His name?"

"Reuben Rattam, or Roarin' Rube what used ter be."

"An' he has been hit?"

"We should remark. You can't leave Denver till we know what's goin' ter be ther results ov yer shootin'—till Rube rekivers er dies."

"Then he isn't dead?" asked Centipede Sam with the air of a man who was disappointed.

"He might ez well be. Come hyer. We'll tako yer down ter Rube, an' let 'im identify yer ef he's able ter."

Here was a peril. To go to the man he had ruthlessly shot would be to have himself exposed—to be discovered as Centipede Sam for whom, dead or alive, there was throughout the great West a standing reward of five hundred dollars.

Roaring Rube, if able, would unmask him; he would die declaring that he was the man wanted—the original Centipede Sam for whose neck a hundred lasses waited.

"We've got ter go, girl," he said sullenly to Leadville Lucy who had not uttered a word since the appearance of the six men.

"They say I shot a man to-night an' they want ter hang Yuba Dave by ther word ov some galoot what's out o' his head. I guess a fellar has ter stand it, seein' as how they've got no kivered an' at ther mercy. I'll lead ther hosses."

"You'll leave ther steeds an' yer pard behind," was the stern rejoinder. "We take you alone ter Roarin' Rube."

"Thet's not givin' a chap a fair show. I'll lose time ef I have ter come back hyer arter ther hosses."

"We'll see ter thet," laughed the spokesman of the six. "Mebbe you'll not hev ter come back."

There was a startling significance in the last sentence; Centipede Sam saw it and said in low whispers to the girl:

"Watch whar they take me; foller us, bring ther hosses along. Don't forget; we must strike ther new trail afore mornin', er all may be lost."

Leadville Lucy made no reply but gave him a look which said: "I will obey," and the Death Spider stepped toward the determined six.

"Now for Rube's," said the leader, and the party moved off with Centipede Sam in their midst, and keenly watched by eyes under which in dark hands were clutched some formidable revolvers.

"I hope I'll find ther saint dead or out'en his head," mentally ejaculated Centipede Sam. "Ter be detained hyer—ter be called Centipede by Roarin' Rube might interfere with my big plans. Ther lone hand war gettin' on famously till now. They've caught one ov my best cards; but, by ther eternal! I must win it back afore long."

He walked sullenly in the midst of the Denverites to the little house from which he had lately walked chafing like a lion. He saw the moon shining upon it and the door showed him the pathway of his bullets. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder as his foot struck the threshold; but Leadville Lucy was not in sight.

With the heavy hand of the leader of the six on his shoulder, Centipede Sam was marched into the house and through the first room into the one beyond.

A light burned on the table and was bright enough to reveal a man lying on a cot, with another man sitting by him on a three-legged stool.

"How is he, Bill?" asked the captain of the squad glancing at the man on the cot.

"He's been out o' his head ever since yer went away," was the reply.

"An' he's asleep now?"

Before a reply could be given the recumbent figure moved, and Roaring Rube Rattam sprang half-way up.

"Did you get him?" he cried staring wildly at the group before him. "Show me the man who bored me with a forty-four."

"Hyar he is, Rube. Hold ther lamp before him, Bill. Thar, that way. Hyer he is, Rube. Is this ther man?"

The lamp which had been snatched from the table was held before Centipede Sam's face and its light fell full upon it.

Roaring Rube rested himself on his elbows and stared wildly into the Texan's face. His burning eyes seemed ready to fly from their sockets and to fasten themselves on the man they glared at, and his hands clutched the blankets at his side.

"That's the man!" he said in condemning tones. "I don't like ter go back on an old pard—I once said I never would. But, my God! see what he did ter night—shot me when I had let him go, when I could hev put all Denver at his heels. He fired through my door an' put a bullet inter my breast. Don't I know him? Who could know him better than I do? Shot me—didn't yer, Sam?—shot ther man what carried yer half dead once from a Comanche camp? Yes, gentlemen, thet's ther man—thet's Centipede Sam!"

The seven men started and all looked into the Texan's face.

"Listen ter a chap out o' his head—that's right, mebbe," said the Death Spider, essaying a cool laugh. "Give thet man his mind an' see whether he calls me Centipede Sam. I'm no fool, gents. Do I look like one? Ef I war Centipede Sam d'yer think I'd come ter Denver—run headlong inter all ther nooses waitin' hyer fer thet outlaw?"

This seemed a poser to the Denverites; they glanced at Roaring Rube.

"As I'm ter stand afore ther Judge afore long, I stick ter my charge," he said slowly and solemnly. "Thet man is Don Frisco's right bow-er. He is Centipede Sam. Heaven knows what brought him ter Denver—ter finish me mebbe."

"We found a girl—a young girl with him, Rube."

"Ther victim ov some lie, I'll bet my heart!" exclaimed Roaring Rube. "Thet man is famous for what he calls lone hands; he plays 'em everywhar. He is playin' one now. Ask him; he can't go back on it. A girl—a young girl with him? Poor thing!—hoodwinked an' caught in a trap—a netted fly!"

If the men had been listening beyond Roaring Rube's thrilling voice, they would have heard a sound in the darkened room between them and the street.

"Heavens! have I trusted the real Centipede Sam?" ejaculated the girl who stood in the middle of the room. "Am I called one of his victims—deceived—hoodwinked with a lie? My God! The dying man in there knows him; he is not out of his head now. Centipede Sam, show me the trail of the man who killed Victor! He cannot! He must be playing one of his lone hands for me; he has deceived me from Leadville. I will break the spell here—now!"

She sprang toward the front door, jerked it open without noise and plunged out into the moonlight.

"I'll find the slayer without his help!" she cried. "Hark!"

She paused for a moment at the door and heard the voice of the Texan, as he cried:

"It's a lie, gentlemen! Thet man is out ov his head. Me Centipede Sam? Mebbe I'm George Washington, too. It's a lie—thet falsehood ov a crazy man!"

"We'll try thet later—to-morrow," answered a stern voice—not Roaring Rube's. "Denver'll do ther fair thing, sir. She'll give ver a show."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CLOSE SHAVE.

CENTIPEDE SAM had fallen into an unpleasant predicament in coming to Denver; he had committed one error in visiting Roaring Rube and another in firing through the door.

"Goin' ter try me afore all Denver, eh?" he ejaculated to himself when he found himself marching from Rube's house under guard. "It's

some time till daylight an' we'll see what a lone hand 'll do for a feller."

He looked around him, but in vain, for Leadville Lucy. He did not know that the girl his beautiful dupe—had followed him to the ex-road-agents' house, nor that she had heard Roaring Rube denounce him as Centipede Sam, Don Frisco's pard. The girl was not to be seen, and he had cautioned her to follow him, to keep near, as if he expected by some coup to escape from the clutches of the six Denverites.

"She'll turn up yet. Ther girl is completely hoodwinked. What I told her about strikin' ther new trail will keep her by me. Ef these Denver dogs give me a show, I'll show them thet ther Death Spider ov Texas hasn't forgotten his old cunnin'."

But the Denverites did not intend that any avenue of escape should be left open for their prisoner's benefit; they themselves put more belief in Roaring Rube's accusation than in the emphatic denial; yet they could hardly believe that a man of Centipede Sam's notoriety would have the hardihood to operate in Denver where every hand was against him.

Some of the bills and offers of reward posted against this desperado had been colored by the action of time; some had been posted five years or more, and more than one rumor of the villain's death had reached Denver and other places.

By some these rumors were believed, by others laughed at, and although the bills were allowed to retain their old places, but few expected to see the reward claimed, and nobody hunted for Centipede Sam.

Now he was in Denver, that is Roaring Rube Rattam, who ought to know him, said so, and it was believed that Rube was a dying man.

Of course the prisoner had declared that he was merely Yuba Dave, and laughed at the idea of Centipede Sam running his head through the noose in Denver.

No person in Denver had heard of the accusation made by Calumet Tom in Leadville, for Pawnee had told no one but Denver Duke; therefore, if convicted at all, it would have to be on Roaring Rube's testimony, and that individual was likely to be dead or insane before daylight.

Centipede Sam was conducted back to the hotel at which he had put up on his arrival in Denver, and he soon found himself in the "office" guarded by men who were his equals in physique, and on whose faces sat enthroned quiet determination and a desire to do justice.

The important papers—the key to the bonanza for which he plotted—were still concealed next to his skin. They had to be guarded well, and the Texan had resolved to defend them with his life.

Of course he had been deprived of his weapons before the hotel was reached, and he now leaned against the counter with his lips glued together in the presence of his captors, and with the dogged defiance of the desperado in his eyes.

As yet, he had seen nothing of Leadville Lucy and the horses; he had noticed the absence of the steeds left in front of the building, and thought for some time that the girl had removed them to a place of safety and that she was watching her opportunity to co-operate with him in any movement he might inaugurate.

The night wore on bringing to the hotel singly and in little groups men who had been summoned from their homes by the startling news of the shooting of Roaring Rube and the arrest of the murderer, supposed to be Centipede Sam. The last assertion was received with considerable allowance, but all who heard it made their way to the hotel and looked at the man whose arrest had stirred up the silver city.

Each new arrival was given an opportunity to inspect the prisoner to his satisfaction, but of all not one could say that they had ever seen him before.

Denver was made up of all classes, men who had roughed it throughout the West and Southwest, miners, prospectors, gamblers, desperadoes, and sports. Not one but had heard of Centipede Sam; some claimed to have seen him, years before, of course; but no one stepped forward and said that the man who called himself Yuba Dave despite Roaring Rube's accusation was the Death Spider of Texas.

And so, as the day approached and the crowd increased, Centipede Sam took hope, and his look changed to one of triumph.

The hotel was the center of attraction and when the first light of morning came it seemed that all Denver crowded the street in front of it, and the "office" where the captive stood closely guarded.

In the mean time, a search had been instituted for Leadville Lucy. The Denverites hoped to get Roaring Rube's charge; but the girl was not to be found; Denver did not hold her.

"Whenever yer ready, gents," remarked Centipede Sam quietly to his watchers. "Ther crowd outside thar ain't ther kind thet usually gives a feller a show; but I'm takin' my chances, yer see. Drive on ther stage."

These words were spoken so coolly that they sent a murmur of admiration through the crowd.

"We'll begin now," answered the man who had led the six Denverites, by whom Centipede

Sam had been arrested, and he mounted the counter as he finished:

"Gents ov Denver, ef thar's among yer any one who knows ther prisoner in charge, let him step forward an' give ther court his information."

"Stand ther prisoner up along side ov yer, Bob." "Fetch 'im outside!" "Let all Denver see 'im!"

These and similar cries followed Bowie Bob's invitation, and it was deemed advisable to take Centipede Sam to the front of the hotel where he was invited to mount a barrel which he did, and overlooked the crowd with folded arms.

"Thar he is, gents," continued Bowie Bob. "Ef any one ov yer knows 'im fer Yuba Dave, as he calls himself, Centipede Sam er any one else, shoot it out and don't be backward."

The shouting stopped, and the crowd pressed nearer. The Death Spider of Texas looked into each face, but saw no familiar countenance. His eyes still burned with triumph.

"Who says he's Centipede Sam?" cried a voice.

"Ther man he shot last night—Roaring Rube."

"Rube ought'er know; he war Don Frisco's pard once."

"What ef he war?" said Centipede Sam with a proud curl of the lip. "I shot that man last night because I war insulted. He called me Centipede Sam, an' tried ter throw me inter a reg'lar death-net."

"Bring up Rube! Set 'im face ter face with ther prisoner, an' see whether he'll stick ter his charge."

"They've gone for Rube now," said Bowie Bob, glancing down the street.

At that moment four stalwart men appeared in sight, carrying the corners of a blanket on which lay a man.

"Hyer he comes! hyer's Roarin' Rube!" cried a dozen voices.

Centipede Sam looked from his elevated station, and fixed his eyes on the man in the blanket as he was carried nearer.

He saw the four men quicken their steps, and the crowd drew back to let them upon the sidewalk.

"Rube's mighty nigh ther end, Bowie," said one of the quartette in a whisper to Bowie Bob. "What yer want out o' him ye'll hev ter git soon—right away."

Bowie Bob stepped to the blanket and waved the pressing and expectant crowd back.

He saw the condition of the wounded man, he noticed the almost lusterless eye, the trembling lips, and the ashen cheeks.

"Rube, Rube, yer know me, eh?" he said, laying his bronzo hand softly on the old road-agent's shoulder.

"Yes—Bowie—I—know yer," was the answer.

"We want yer testimony, Rube—all Denver's hyer waitin' for it. Mo an' ther boys heard it last night, but Denver wants it now. Ther man on ther bar'l thar is under trial. Look squar'ly at 'im, Rube. I'll hold yer up."

Bowie Bob's strong arms were placed under the man on the blanket, and he held him up while he told him to look at the man gazing down upon him with the coolness of Mephistopheles from the top of the barrel.

The crowd held breath for a moment; the subdued excitement was intense.

Much depended on Roaring Rube's reply. Was the prisoner Centipede Sam? Denver wanted to know.

A smile came quickly to Centipede Sam's mouth; he saw Rube try to speak and fail; he tried the second time and fell back.

"Brandy!" cried Bowie Bob. "Don't let Roarin' Rube go afore he talks!"

Half a dozen men sprung forward and a bottle of brandy was held at the dying Denverite's mouth.

He took several swallows of the fiery liquor and his eyes were seen to snap.

"Thot brandy 'd galvanize a corpse!" cried Bowie Bob, seeing the almost instant effects of the potion. "Give Rube a chance ter breathe. He'll get at this thing—this testimony—in a minute. Stand back! Show yer feller-citizen respect, pards ov Denver!"

The crowd watched the dying road-agent intently, although at Bowie Bob's last words the big bronzo fellows fell back.

"Thar! he's dead!" cried one as Rube's head dropped to one side and his lips parted suddenly.

"Dead!—Hades, no!" exclaimed Bob. "No man's dead till his heart stops! I'll hold yer up, Rube. Thar's ther man we want yer ter recognize. Take 'im in; ye saw 'im twice last night."

Roaring Rube fastened his eyes on Centipede Sam, and the gaze of the two men met.

"Who is he, Rube?" asked Bowie Bob eagerly.

"I—don't—know!"

"What's that?" cried one-half of the crowd surprised.

"I—don't—know 'im—Bowie," persisted Roaring Rube in gasps.

"But last night yer said he war Centipede Sam," said Bowie Bob amazed.

"I—war—out—ov my—noggin—then! Yes—yes—I don't know that man."

"But he shot yer, Rube?"

"No—not—thet man!"

The men who held the blanket—members of the gang that had arrested Centipede Sam—almost let Rube fall.

"What did I tell yer?" said Centipede, throwing a glance over the crowd. "He war out o' his head when you made me face him last night."

"But you shot him?" cried a voice.

"Yes. I had ter. Life is life in Denver as well as elsewhar."

Bowie Bob did not seem to hear these words.

"Don't go back on yer last night's statement, Rube," he cried to the gasping form on the blanket. "Look at 'im. He's Centipede Sam, isn't he?"

"No!—not ther real Centipede."

"Hang ther g'loot!" hissed Bowie Bob, removing his arms from beneath Roaring Rube's head. "He didn't talk thet way last night. He said then—"

The man in the blanket uttered a strange cry fraught with pain, and sprung almost erect.

"Hold him down thar!" cried a dozen voices.

It was no use; the man dropped back as suddenly as he had started up, his hands buried themselves in the blanket, and with his eyes riveted on Centipede Sam, he gave one gasp and died!

The whole crowd as if awed by the thrilling scene stood still for a moment.

Centipede Sam dropped quickly from the barrel and stepped back. Nobody seemed willing to take the initiative to stop him; and the crowd parted to let him through.

"I forced him with a look to recall ther old oath ov brotherhood," he muttered. "Rube hedn't ther sand ter go back on it even with death at his door. By heavens! it war lucky thet I thought ov it! He obeyed it. Ha! now let Denver prove me Centipede Sam if she kin! I'll get out o' this buzzard's nest right away. I've got ter. Bowie Bob an' his lay-out might keep up trouble."

He left the crowd without once glancing back, and walked coolly to the corner of the hotel which he turned.

Denver was no place for him; he was Centipede Sam in the eyes of more than one citizen; men were already saying that he had mesmerized Roaring Rube.

All at once the Texan became conscious that he was followed, and as he glanced over his shoulder he was touched by a hand.

"My God! what fetched you ter Denver?" he exclaimed facing the man who confronted him.

"You!" was the answer. "It war a close shave, eh, Centipede?"

"Devilish close, captain," grinned the Death Spider. "Ther old oath held Rube down ter it at last. My lone hand—"

"Curse yer lone hand!" was the interruption.

CHAPTER XIX.

GUARDING THE BONANZA.

THE man who confronted Centipede Sam was a late arrival in Denver. In fact, he had reached the town just as day was breaking, and had not been slow to find the Texan faced by the crowd and on trial for his life.

He was Centipede's equal in physique, and handsome, well dressed, and the possessor of a pair of eyes that seemed capable of looking one through.

The Death Spider of Texas, who was on his way to the hotel stables in quest of his horse, knew the man in an instant.

"I'm goin' ter git out o' this trap," continued Centipede, after biting his lip over the interruption. "Curse yer lone hand."

"I would under ther circumstances," was the answer. "Whar's yer hoss?"

"I don't know for certain. Mebbe he war led back to ther stables. I'll see."

"Then join me in ther pass west o' town. I'll be thar. I want ter see you, Centipede."

They separated, Centipede Sam plunged into the stables and demanded to know whether his horse was there, and the dark-eyed sport turned back toward the crowd still before the building.

He heard mutterings of an approaching storm which boded no good to Centipede Sam if he tarried in Denver; the belief that he was the Death Spider of Texas was gaining ground under Bowie Bob's harangue.

"Thar he lies, gents!" cried the big sport, facing the crowd while he pointed at the stiffening figure of Roaring Rube on the blanket.

"I know he went back on what he said last night, but he war under a spell. Thet infernal jumper—his own assassin—held 'im under a spell. Them lips said last night thet ther man on ther bar'l war Centipede Sam—ther sole an' genuine Death Spider ov Texas. I say so, too! Bowie Bob an' his six pards stand ready ter maintain what Rube said last night!"

Language like this was getting the crowd back to fever heat, and the man who listened glanced anxiously toward the stables where Centipede Sam seemed to linger.

"He's got sense enough ter leave town by not crossin' this street. I'll trust him for that," he said, and the next moment he left the crowd and in one of the back streets vaulted into a saddle.

Giving the horse a word, he left Denver's suburbs behind, and did not draw rein till he reached a pass a short distance beyond the last cabin.

"I'm ther first one hyer," he said to himself. "By heavens! I'll know something ov this famous 'lone hand' when he comes up. Ov course he war surprised ter see me in Denver, war expectin' an angel first, I think. Whar is he? Hasn't he got out o' ther trap yet? Hello!"

The exclamation was called forth by the appearance of a horseman between him and Denver, and he spoke no more, but waited quietly till the rider came up.

It was Centipede Sam.

"They're foam'in' back thar," said the Death Spider nodding his head toward Denver and displaying his teeth by a grin.

"They hev cause ter ef I took in ther lay-out properly," was the answer.

"P'raps. Hang me, captain, ef I wanted ter kill Rube when I druv ther bullets through his door—I merely wanted ter show him thet I war no infant when r'iled; but he knew thet long ago. It war a case ov devil turned saint. When a man gets too good for this earthly paradise, he ought ter be translated. Eh, captain?"

There was no immediate reply to this; the two men sat on their horses in the mountain pass, the one called captain leaning forward a little with accusation in his eyes.

"Wal," he said suddenly, "how goes the lone hand now?"

"Fairly well."

"Whar's yer pard?"

"I had none."

"No girl?"

Centipede Sam started.

"Come, Sam. All mankind ar' not liars. You went ter Leadville t'other night; you war accused, you used yer revolver, you escaped; you left with ther queen ov ther camp—Leadville Lucy. She came with you ter Denver. You ar' alone now. What does it mean?"

The man spoke in the voice of one who appeared to have authority.

"Hang ther girl!" cried Centipede Sam. "She went back on me! She won't do ter tie ter, captain."

He talked with a light laugh, which only lent new flashes to the eyes that regarded him, and compressed their owner's lips.

"What did she see in you that she followed you on such short acquaintance? She wouldn't have followed Don Frisco for all Colorado; but here she rides from Leadville at your side. Did you spell Leadville Lucy, Centipede?"

"No! If I had she wouldn't hev deserted this bonanza chick," said the Texan snappishly. "Curse ther girl, I say!"

"The men back thar ar' more likely ter hang you first!" was the retort. "What took you ter Leadville?"

"Adventure—a desire ter inquire inter ther next silver consignment."

"On your oath?"

Centipede Sam did not like to be pressed.

"What else 'd take me thar?" he snapped. "I didn't go ter buy ther town."

"But you got thar while they war holdin' an inquest over Whiplash George's garroted passenger."

"Yes."

"An' you took with you ther dead man's valise."

"Which I happened ter find on ther road."

"Happened ter?"

"Yes, Don Frisco."

The king of the Colorado cut-purses replied with a faint smile. Centipede Sam saw that he was not more than half believed; but he shrugged his broad shoulders and went on.

"A man don't find many valises on this trail, an' ther findin' ov this one war so odd that, by Jupiter, captain, I took it ter Leadville ter restore it ter its owner. I wanted ter go thar anyhow, an' ther valise I saw would introduce me ter Leadville society."

"An' it did, eh?" said Don Frisco.

"Bet yer life! They called me Centipede Sam, like they do now in Denver. Calumet Tom sent hyer fer a witness who never got ter identify me."

"But he may. You missed your man that time, Centipede."

"Missed Denver Duke in ther hotel?" cried the Texan.

"Missed him."

"I ought ter catch a bullet myself!" was the ejaculation. "Didn't I touch him?"

"Hardly. He didn't look hurt when I saw him."

"You?"

"Yes. That young Denver Dandy owes his life to me."

Centipede Sam clearly showed the astonishment occasioned by Don Frisco's last remark.

"That's more than I would have done," he blurted. "Wait till I find him ag'in! It will be no miss then, captain. Whar ar' ther boys?"

It was Don Frisco's time to bite his lip.

"They gave me ther slip," he said, madly.

"They put back to watch the silver which they scented some days ago. I hope they'll get ther fill o' it. But see hyer, Centipede. I'm goin' back a little distance. We'll take up thet valise which war empty when you laid it down before

ther coroner's jury at Colonel Starbottle's hotel."

"It war empty, I b'lieve."

"So I've been told. But look at me, Centipede—straight into ther orbs ov Don Frisco, yer old captain, an' say thet thet valise—Victor's—war empty when yer hand first clutched it. This isn't Denver, it isn't Leadville. It's only a mountain-pass, an' we're alone. Empty when you first touched it, eh?"

The countenance of Centipede Sam changed instantly. Don Frisco's questions seemed to form a mortal affront; he drew down his bushy brows and glared out from under them at the Colorado road-agent.

"I want the truth," continued Don Frisco. "No 'lone hand' in my presence. We've been pards along while, Centipede Sam—we haven't dissolved the tie yet. Already you have broken one oath; you are playin' a lone hand in the teeth of your last vow. Now, sir, Don Frisco wants no falsehoods. He knows more than you think. The man in the stage was garroted; he did not leave Denver with an empty valise. Travelers in these parts ar' not in the habit ov doin' that. You waited for that man just as if you looked for him; you got into ther stage while it rattled over ther roughest part o' ther trail; you garroted Victor an' you took ther valise! Say 'no' ef you can, Centipede—say 'no' ter Don Frisco ef you daro!"

The Death Spider uttered an exclamation of hot resentment, and his hand flew to his belt in which stuck a bowie which he had held in reserve under his steed's saddle-skirt; but ere it touched the hilt, Don Frisco's fingers darted forward like a panther and closed on his wrist.

"No 'ter me, eh?" he fiercely hissed, glaring into the Death Spider's face. "Nothin' in thet valise? Beware, Centipede Sam! I am captain yet; ther oath ov' allegiance war for ten years. It hasn't run out. Men don't carry coin in valises twixt Denver an' Leadville. Whiplash George war heard ter say that when thet valise left Denver, it was half-full ov papers tied up in packages. Whar ar' they? Come! by ther eternal heavens! I want ther truth!"

Centipede Sam knew that the precious contents of that particular valise were at that very moment under his dark shirt, nestling near his heart, but confess the truth—never!

"No 'lone hand' hyer, Centipede," Don Frisco went on with scarcely a moment's pause. "No cold deck on Don Frisco! What bonanza-prospect led yer ter watch thet stage, ter choke Victor ter death, an' ter steal his papers? Out with it! We war ter know an' ter hold all things in common—thet war ther oath, you know. Whar ar' ther papers?"

Centipede Sam's answer was a quick jerk that wrenched his hand from Don Frisco's grip, loosened somewhat by his eagerness to probe the Death Spider's secret to the bottom. He started back with an oath.

"Hang you! I'll spoil yer last lone hand!" cried the cut-purse captain, as his hand darted toward his revolvers.

"Not yet, captain! I'll play this one through ef it costs my heart's blood!"

If Centipede Sam had started back, he was quite as agile in darting forward again; with eyes fastened on Don Frisco he sprung straight at the mountain brigand and got in a blow over the pistol arm which sent him to the ground! Then, with a shout of success, he drove his heels against his steed's flanks, and fairly flew over the trail toward Leadville.

"You kin scent like a fox, captain!" he exclaimed. "Want ter inspect ther valuable dock-erments I carry in ther vicinity ov my breathin' apparatus, eh, Don Frisco? No, thank ye, pard! They're ther key ter a bonanza fer which I prefer playin' ther biggest lone hand ever held in Colorado! Foller me, try ter clutch them papers, an' I'll break ther ten years ov allegiance with ther report ov a revolver! No, no! Don Frisco. My 'lone hand' is bound ter win. Leadville Lucy must be found—then, ther trail thet leads ter ther diamond mine!"

He disappeared, and the man who rose from under the feet of Don Frisco's horse gazed down the trail, saying nothing, but vowing vengeance with a pair of eyes that burned like living coals.

The two desperadoes were to meet again.

CHAPTER XX.

FUSSY, BUT NO FOOL.

"Five ter one thet yer won't git through! Put up er crawfish! I'm yer bettin' huckleberry. Five ter one, I say—who'll kiver ther coin?"

The man who spoke thus stood in one of the squares of Leadville in the early dawn, holding up between thumb and finger a five-dollar gold piece, which he shook in the faces of a group of men who were watching the loading of a stage about to set out on a trip to Denver.

His remarks were addressed principally to a heavy-set man of forty or forty-five, who was inspecting a brace of heavy revolvers for the fortieth time.

"Shake out yer dust, major?" continued the would-be-better-to-the-plump individual. "Five ter one, understand, thet thet consignment ov riches never gits ter Denver in thet vehicle."

"Kiver ther coin, major!" cried several from the group.

"Gentlemen, it's simply impossible, sir," said Major Butterball, turning to the crowd. "I'm about to leave Leadville in the same financial condition that I struck it in; the same, sir. You know that I was met an' robbed by Don Frisco just beyond town—thet in consequence of thet infamous act, sir, I lost not only the cash I had on my person, but the money I put up in Denver thet I would git hyer without bein' robbed. A cool thousand I lost in thet way to say nothin' o' my revolvers an' the cash I had on my person. But, gents, this consignment with yours truly, Majah Butterball, gets through ter Denver, er bu'sts."

"Five ter one on ther bu'st!" roared the big fellow, who continued to keep the coin tauntingly before the major's face. "Ef ther majah hezn't ther collateral ov his own, mebbe some Leadville gent 'll advance ther V."

These remarks made the plump man swear. "By Heaven! I'd bet 'im a thousand, if I had it, gents," he cried. "Whar's Colonel Starbottle?"

"Hyer, sir," said the proprietor of the Grand Colorado, stepping promptly forward. "What shall it be, majah?"

"Advance me a five in gold. That man yonder would make an angel bet. Five to one that this stage-load ov precious stuff, Majah Homer Butterball included, sir, never gits to Denver. Thet's what he says. Sir, it's an insult to my honor; it galls my very soul! Thanks, colonel," and Major Butterball held up the coin he had snatched from Starbottle's palm. "Now then, Amazon Alf, bet or crawfish! Five to five!"

The crowd applauded the major's challenge with a boisterous laugh, that colored the big rough's temples.

"Hyer's yer stake; ketch 'er, kurnel," he said, tossing his gold-piece toward the landlord of the Colorado. "Kiver it in ther kurnel's fist, major. Even bet; witness it, gents. Five ter five thet ther silver never gets ter Denver!"

"An' Majah Butterball, sir," added the possessor of that euphonious name.

"Oh, yes; thet's nothin' mean about Amazon Alf!" cried the Leadville better, and the two coins were dropped side by side into Colonel Starbottle's palm.

"Now, gents, for Denver!" exclaimed the major, climbing into the stage, to which four strong horses had been harnessed. "A thousand Don Friscos an' pards don't keep this vehicle an' freight from reachin' ther destination—all Tartarus sha'n't keep us from thet!"

"Hurrah for ther majah! Three cheers for Majah Butterball—ther silver guard, ther gentleman an' hero! Give 'im a parter, boys!"

Colonel Starbottle set the example by elevating his hat, and as the driver cracked his long whip over the ears of the head horses, three hearty cheers rung out on the soft air of the early dawn. Even Amazon Alf joined in the cheering, which had a laughable side, for the little man thus honored was standing in the doorway of the stage bowing his thanks to the rough crowd.

Away lumbered the heavy stage, the hoofs of the horses stirring up a dust which almost completely hid them, and the man on the box—not Whiplash George, for he had retired from the profession—cracking his keen lash above the ears of his leaders.

The "silver consignment" was not as large as it would have been if Don Frisco had not performed his audacious robbery of the major almost within sight of Leadville's main square. Indeed, the consignment was very small that particular morning, and occupied but a very small space under the seat which the major occupied, and which he secretly resolved to hold at the risk of his life.

The stage was the same in which the tragedy of our romance had taken place, and Major Butterball felt something akin to a chill steal to his heart when he glanced for the first time into the corner where Victor had been strangled, and imagined that he saw there the form and the ghastly face of the dead.

He had loaded his revolvers with the utmost care, and in the presence of some of the best shots in Leadville.

"Egad, sir, gents," he said during the operation, "thar'll be more than one mountain fiend knock at the gates ov Tartarus if this stage is stopped! Thar's ter be bloody work twixt hyer and Denver mebbe; but I'll not be one of the corpses. I shoot when I look; thar's a connection between eye an' trigger—a death drop as it war, gents—by Heaven! a passport ter eternity!"

As the stage rattled over the road and left the city of the Silver Hills behind, Major Butterball tried to appear at his ease and lit a cigar which he smoked with a good deal of complacency. He was the only occupant of the stage, and had it therefore all to himself.

Suddenly he poked his head out of the window and shouted to the driver.

"Ar' we nearly thet?"

"Not yet—five miles ahead, I think from George's description," was the answer. "I'll tell yer, cap'n."

"Captain?" echoed the passenger indignantly.

"Address a man by his true title, sir. I'm Majah Butterball—majah, sir, an' egad! I won my rank by downright hard fightin', sir."

"In ther rebellion, majah?"

"Yes, sir—whar honor war to be won—at ther cannon's mouth—at the front, sir."

"I war thar myself."

"You?"

"I should gently whisper, majah."

"Whar did you fight?" asked the doughty major with a contemptuous sneer.

"Whar thirteen dollars a month took thousands ov poor galoos—ter ther cannon's mouth."

"In what army?" asked the major.

"Bob Lee's."

"Shake! over ther bloody chasm we bury all animosities. I fought with Grant!" and Major Butterball put up his hand to have it seized by the big driver, who pressed it till he bit his lip and winced.

"Blue an' Gray, eh?" laughed the major, who was leaning out of the window at the expense of his equilibrium. "I'll come up an' take in the kentry while we talk our battles over. By George! sir, I'm glad ov ther honor ov meetin' an old foe. Have a cigar—no cheroots—Colonel Starbottle's best. Oh, we'll git to Denver! Amazon Alf's five is lost. Ha, ha! I put that man down for a fool!"

The major was about to continue, asking the driver to slow up until he could reach a perch at his side, when a startling exclamation rung out on the air.

"Halt! Pull up yer hosses thar, whippy!"

The hands of the two men separated as if a bullet had shot them apart, and Major Butterball dropped back into the stage.

"Don Frisco, by Jehosaphat!" he ejaculated.

"Now comes ther tug o' war. Stopped we ar', an' not ten miles out o' Leadville. Now, majah, do yer duty."

Seated on horses but a few feet in advance of the stage which had been stopped, were two men who looked like giants in the saddle. The upper parts of their faces were covered with black masks, *a la* portraits of Don Frisco in costume, and their appearance, with the huge revolvers gripped in their hands, was enough to blanch the cheek of the bravest.

After the command to halt, the two men rode forward, one on each side of the trail, and leaning forward, looked with greedy black eyes into the vehicle.

"Hello! a livin' butter ball!" exclaimed one, catching sight of the passenger in one corner. "Toss out yer weapons. Come! no foolishness with ther gold dragons ov ther Rockies!"

Two revolvers looked menacingly into the major's face, and he gave utterance to a mad oath.

"Toss 'em out—quick!"

"Thet's what I call downright robbery, sir," he cried. "Take my pistol—take my purse; it's all ther same ter me." And one of the major's weapons was thrown from the stage.

"Toss out ther other."

"I'm no arsenal!" was the retort, in well-feigned indignation.

"All right. Keep yer corner. Ef yer move, by ther eternal! we'll let you start a mountain graveyard. Go through the vehicle, Quartz," the speaker added in lower tones to his companion. "I'll watch ther lay-out."

One of the masked men rode up to the end of the stage and threw open the door.

"Whar's yer silver?" he cried fiercely.

"Hyer, my beloved seraph," said the major. "I've been waitin' for yer ever since we left Leadville—'pon honor I have, sir. Told 'em they war fools ter send ther silver over ther road at this time. Thar's ther plunder."

The major had changed seats and pointed to the one just left as he concluded.

"Lift up ther lid!" commanded the man.

"With ther most exquisite pleasure," was the reply.

The next moment Major Butterball raised the rather heavy lid of the box which served the double use of chest and seat and watched the desperado as he leaned forward with glittering eyes.

"Thunder! is that all?" he cried, disgusted at sight of the few parcels in heavy brown paper.

"Yes."

"Nothin' else in ther stage?"

"Yes—this! you infernal robber!"

"This" was the revolver which Major Butterball clapped that instant against the road-agent's head, and the words were followed by a heavy but terrible report!

It was the work of an instant and the man staggered back breaking open the door and pitching headlong into the trail.

The next second the man on horseback sent a bullet at the major, but the leaden pellet shivered a part of the window frame at his cheek and deluged him with splinters!

"Now for you!" flashed the passenger, and at the quick shot he fired, the second man went from the saddle.

"Git out o' this!" he yelled frantically to the driver. "The mountain may be full ov 'em!"

The man on the box yelled at the horses rendered restive by the shots and the smell of powder, and the team started.

"By Jupiter! I didn't finish ther last one!" ejaculated the major.

His words were called forth by the man last shot, who was on his feet aiming his revolver at the stage.

Major Butterball started toward the rear door to deliver another shot, when puff! went the road-agent's weapon, and with a wild cry, the driver fell past the window—shot through the brain!

"Jerusalem! This is winnin' yer five dollars with a vengeance, major!" cried the Denverite. "Suthin's got ter be done ter stop this team. It's death ter jump out, eternity ter stay in!"

The four horses were now plunging over the trail at mad speed; the vehicle threatened to go over every instant.

"I'll do it if it makes a seraph out o' me—I'll stop this team!" grated the major.

He began to squeeze his body through the window and to reach the driver's seat. It was terrible work, but he worked like a hero. Once or twice he stuck, but got free with an effort.

When he reached the seat he had no hat and his coat was in shreds; but gripping the lines he fell back, and saw-sawed with the strength of a giant, pulling the fretful steeds back upon their haunches, and stopping them with bloody mouths at last, three miles from the scene of the battle.

It was well done!

"I've handled hossflesh before!" cried the major triumphantly resting on his laurels and eying the panting steeds. "Who says now that this team never gits ter Denver with its passenger an' freight? Hello! a mountain queen, by Jupiter!"

Major Butterball's exclamation was called forth by the sudden appearance of a woman on horseback, and he waited with much curiosity for her to come up.

"Got out o' his clutches, eh?" he asked addressing the person as she drew rein beneath his perch.

"I left him behind, in Denver—in the hands of men who unmasked him. He was Centipede Sam."

"What! ain't you ther woman Don Frisco captured in Leadville?—ain't you Keno Kate?"

"No," with a smile. "I am Leadville Lucy!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NEW DAVID AND HIS GOLIATH.

WE know already that the girl who had drawn rein before the valiant Major Butterball had withdrawn from Centipede Sam's clutches the moment she heard the Death Spider called by his real name in Roarin' Rube's house in Denver; she had stolen back to the two horses left in front of the hotel, mounted one and left the city, riding of course in the direction of Leadville.

Fate or fortune—no matter which—had timed her journey so as to bring her face to face with Major Butterball just after he had stopped the runaway horses of the overland stage.

The major was surprised to learn that the beautiful being who confronted him was Leadville Lucy, and not Keno Kate, but he soon recovered from his astonishment enough to give, in rather disjointed sentences it is true, but very graphic ones, an account of the fight with the masked gold dragons.

The girl at once proposed to go back.

"All right! Back we go!" cried the major. "The man who got on his feet after my second shot and tumbled the driver from the box fell over again ther next instant, an' war lyin' on his face on ther trail till I got out o' sight."

"His last effort," said the girl. "He died with the man he shot."

"It might be, but," Major Butterball ground his teeth, "but if he does live, my fragrant rose, by heavens! I'll trump his life hand with ther trigger ace!"

Gathering up the lines and turning the team gracefully in an open but not very smooth place to the left of the trail, the major drove slowly back toward the scene of his contest, Lucy riding alongside, and conversing at intervals while the journey was made.

All at once Major Butterball rose in his seat and threw a look ahead.

"By my boots! They're all thar, girl!" he exclaimed. "I see three men lyin' down thar on ther trail. They played with dynamite when they stopped this vehicle."

"I'll ride ahead and see," and the Queen of Leadville left the major to follow with the four-in-hand while she urged her horse into a gallop and whisked away.

Leadville Lucy soon drew rein on the tragic spot where three men had died in the space of as many minutes. She saw the stalwart figures of the masked desperadoes lying in the sunlight that kissed the mountain trail at that spot, and a few yards away lay the body of the poor driver whose head had stopped the leaden messenger of death.

She gazed quietly at them from the saddle while Major Butterball drove up.

"Quick work an' sure, curse their hidden faces!" he ejaculated climbing down from the top of the vehicle and running to the girl's side. "Thet g'lout yonder I shot in ther stage; that

one got it from his hoss. Jupiter! I've killed Don Frisco!"

"What!" cried Leadville Lucy, surprise almost taking her breath.

"Don Frisco ther king ov cut-purses—the infamous thief who sent me penniless inter Leadville t'other night!" asserted the major stooping over one of the outlaws and throwing back his fringed mask, to expose the white but handsome features to the girl's view. "Thet's ther face I saw in ther starlight—ther same mustache an' ther long hair, too. Don Frisco, I tell yer, girl. Thar's rewards posted all over Colorado for him, dead or alive. I'll surprise Leadville when I get thar."

"Denver, you mean," prompted the girl, remembering that the stage was bound for the latter city when stopped by the gold dragons.

"Leadville! I'm goin' back thar with a load thet'll make ther silver town get up an' dance!" was the response. "Amazon Alf kin take his stakes. I'll just draw on ther town for ther five hundred offered for that mountain daisy thar. Don Frisco, girl, an' killed by Majah Homer Butterball, whose triggers war famous in war times, sir."

The girl could not repress a smile and allowed her gaze to drop to the figure lying at the major's feet.

It was not for her to say that it was not the famous cut-purse of the Rockies, yet she could hardly believe that Butterball had rid the region of its greatest pest. She had heard a thousand times of the black mask with its silken fringe, she had seen the rough and somewhat imaginary portraits of Don Frisco and she had to confess in secret that the major's victim greatly resembled them.

One of the dead outlaws bore a striking resemblance to Centipede Sam, or Yuba Dave, but of course he was not that player of lone hands, for she had left him in Denver and in a perilous situation.

As Major Butterball had made up his mind to go back to Leadville, the girl put forth no remonstrance for she was going thither herself. She saw him draw the bodies of the three dead men into the stage, and then climb up to the seat on top with an air of triumph.

"All aboard for Leadville! I've got freight worth more than ther biggest silver consignment thet ever went over this road! Great heavens! won't Leadville howl for joy?"

The whip cracked over the heads of the horses and with the fat little man in the box, the stage rattled away with the ghastliest load a stage had ever carried. It was a proud time for the major and when the horses got thoroughly warmed up to the excitement, Leadville Lucy found it rather difficult to keep up.

The distance from the scene of the major's victory to Leadville was not great, and the returning stage was greeted with a shout as it rumbled into the outskirts of the silver town.

"I'll show yer a panorama!" chuckled the major noticing the little group that gathered in front of Colonel Starbottle's famous hostelry as he rushed up. "It's a dead give-away an' perfectly harmless—ha, ha, ha!—but such a show—Jerusalem! Leadville will go wild!"

The presence of the major on the stage and in possession of the lines was enough to assure the waiting crowd that something had happened to bring the stage back so soon to Leadville, and a sight of Leadville Lucy astonished them still more.

"Whoa! plant yer hoofs an' grow!" cried the major to the horses as he pulled them up in the crowd. "Back I am, gents—back with a load thet 'll do yer hearts good!"

"What's happened? Whar's Jim, ov Sonoma?"

"On ther inside! fell at his post like a hero. Hold on thar! I'll show ther goods." And the speaker clambered down with an agility that was ludicrous.

A moment sufficed to carry him to the rear of the stage, but already the curious members of the crowd were looking in from the outside.

"Blazes! three dead men!" cried one.

"I should sweetly testify, pards," cried the major. "This seraph didn't take ther silver ter Denver. An accident's fetched 'im back. Will some ov yer hev ther kindness ter remove ther passengers? They can't git out o' their own accord. Dead? Well I would whisper the word!"

The excitement was now intense and in less than five minutes the three bodies had been removed and placed side by side on the sidewalk in front of Starbottle's.

"Thar lies Don Frisco, gents," said the major pointing to one of the men.

"Don Frisco!" The echo flew from the lips of every man who heard.

"Oh, I know!" persisted Butterball. "Thar's a few things a man knows for sertain an' thet's one ov 'em. Look at thet mask—ther silk fringe, ther mustache, black as Solomon, an' thet kingly ha'r. Nobody ever owned 'em but Don Frisco, gents. I'll take ther five hundred shortly. Oh, I'm a dangerous innocent when men fool with me as them two did."

The major walked into the hotel and proceeded to refresh himself at the bar from which he walked after his fifth drink without so much as

telling the dispenser of the fluid to trust him till the "five hundred" had been paid.

We need not say that the news of the mountain tragedy spread like wildfire. The remotest parts of Leadville seemed to get it as soon as the center, and men came from every direction with the grime of the mines on flesh and clothes, and crowded about the three men on the ground.

"Take in ther show, gents. It's free ter look at, but it costs this camp a cool five hundred!" said the major fifty times to the staring crowd.

"What ef thet man thar shouldn't turn out ter be Don Frisco?" meekly ventured one of the lookers on.

"What ef Satan warn't Old Nick?—what ef I warn't ther famous Majah Butterball, sir, ov Rebellion fame?" roared the major, turning upon the speaker and withering him with a look. "Egad, sir, thet effront'ry would wilt a lion!" and he went inside to drown his disgust and anger in another whisky.

There was no mistaking the fact that the major was the hero of the hour. People seemed to forget Leadville Lucy's return in the tragedy that had happened on the mountain trail. The girl had gone quietly to her little home.

Where was Denver Duke? What had become of Calumet Tom? She had not caught sight of either. Had they gone abroad in search of her?

She had rested herself so well that sleep had stolen into her tired system, long refreshing sleep, and when she awoke she was surprised to find that Leadville's eventful day had nearly waned.

Suddenly a footstep sounded on the girl's ears and she looked up to see the familiar figure of Calumet Tom.

Leadville Lucy sprung up at sight of him.

"Denver Duke?" she exclaimed.

"He'll git in by-an'-by. What has happened? How did you get away from Centipede Sam? Tell me."

The girl obeyed, and with the big Leadviller for an auditor, she narrated her adventures from the moment of her quitting Leadville to her return.

"Corraled in Denver, eh?" ejaculated Calumet Tom. "He needs none ov us ter identify him thar ef Roarin' Rube says he's Centipede. Things hev taken an excitin' turn. With Centipede Sam cornered an' Don Frisco wiped out—"

The old miner paused suddenly and wheeled to confront a boy not past thirteen who had glided into the house unseen and unannounced.

"Hello! you hyer, Infant Jim!" he cried.

"Bet yer life, Calumet. Give me yer ear for a moment. Suthin' important."

A stride carried the Leadviller to the boy's side.

"What is it, Jim?" he asked.

"Thar's a man come ter town like ther galoot yer called Centipede Sam ther other night," whispered the kid.

"Impossible!" cried Calumet Tom.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TIGER IN WAIT.

YES, "a man" had come to Leadville, but when Infant Jim led Calumet Tom to the spot where he had seen this individual, he was not to be seen.

The old miner was inclined to believe that the boy had been mistaken, but the little fellow persisted otherwise, and stuck to it that he had seen a certain man in Leadville within the hour, who in more ways than one resembled the person called Centipede Sam by Calumet.

"Wal, he's gone now ef he war hyer, Jim," concluded the miner. "We'll wait fer him ter show up ag'in ef he will."

At that very moment, watching the house occupied by Leadville Lucy, stood the man who had come to Leadville, and who was—need we say it?—the Death Spider of Texas.

"Ter play this lone hand o' mine through, in spite o' fate—thet's ther ideal!" he muttered.

"Lucy has beaten me ter Leadville, but only by a neck, ha, ha! An' Don Frisco? He's on ther track o' ther big bonanza—he b'lieves thar war important dockments in ther v'lise ov ther man what died t'other night in George's stage. Wal, thar war, captain. But, by Heaven! they stay with Centipede Sam till they win for him ther prize played for with ther lone hand! Beat me, beat Satan!"

He laughed again, with his eyes still fastened on the little house which Leadville Lucy, his late beautiful dupe had come back to. He knew that the girl, the prize he wanted, was beyond the door, but he did not go forward and startle her with his step.

Calumet Tom and Infant Jim had not searched the right place for Centipede Sam; they had looked through the crowd congregated before the hotel porch, where lay in the moonlight the bodies of the three men slain in the attempt to plunder the stage.

They had not let one face escape inspection; all had been searched, and the saloons and monte-den visited, but without results that confirmed Infant Jim's information.

Meanwhile, two persons were approaching Leadville who had been there before. They were both mounted, and the crowd in the street

was greeted with an exclamation of wonder by one of the twain.

"Suthin's happened," he said to his companion. "Mebbe they've caught Don Frisco."

"No luck like that," was the reply. "The only trap that catches him is my trigger." Several minutes later the two drew rein near the hotel, and a big man stepped toward them quickly.

"Back, Pawnee!" this person exclaimed, greeting the dark-faced man who looked down into his face from the saddle. "We've got a time hyer. Glance at ther silent pards on ther colonel's porch."

Pawnee's eyes wandered over the heads of the crowd, and saw indistinctly the three corpses lying side by side.

"One ov 'em's Don Frisco, they say," said the man on the ground with a glance at the Indian's companion.

"What! Don Frisco dead?" was the ejaculation. "My God! that cannot be. That mountain demon is not to escape me thus. Who killed him?"

"Major Butterball—the man he robbed t'other night. The fussy old fool shot two men who tried ter rob the stage. Don Frisco fell last—"

"I don't b'lieve it!" was the interruption.

"Go an' see for yerself," snapped Calumet Tom.

"I will!" and under her breath the speaker added fiercely: "Woe to the man who snatches Don Frisco from me."

"Hello thar, gents! let ther woman through," exclaimed Calumet Tom to the crowd and the rough men drew back as the horse moved toward the hotel.

"Whar did yer find thet female?" asked Calumet of the Indian.

"Lodged in ther top o' a tree thet war growin' out o' ther side o' a canyon wall," was the reply. "Don Frisco made her jump over at ther muzzle o' a revolver, an' it war luck, Tom, thet she struck ther tree."

"A close shave, by Jerusalem!" cried the old miner. "Whar's Denver Duke?"

"He went ter Denver, but ther gray o' another mornin' will see him hyer."

"Then we'll all be tergether ag'in. Lucy's back an' we'll hit ther trail ov Centipede Sam."

The eyes of the Indian seemed to sparkle suddenly at the mention of the girl's return home.

He appeared on the eve of asking a question apparently uppermost in his mind, but he kept it back, and just then an exclamation of surprise came from toward the hotel.

"She's found Don Frisco!" said Calumet Tom. "Ther major war right arter all—he did drop ther boss gold dragon."

The woman who had come to Leadville with Pawnee, the Indian in buckskin, was bending over one of the three corpses in the moonlight, and it was from her tongue that the cry just mentioned had fallen.

She was gazing into the face of the one called Don Frisco.

Near by stood the lion of the hour, the little man who had defended the stage to the utter discomfiture and death of the plunderers. A sparkle of triumph was in his eyes, and he had winked knowingly to several when Keno Kate approached the porch.

"That settles it!" he said. "She recognizes Don Frisco. I'll take my reward gents, ov Leadville. Prepare to fork it over."

"Did you speak?" asked the woman, wheeling suddenly upon the major and transfixing him with her gaze. "Are you the man who did this?" and she pointed at the dead desperadoes.

"I'm ther cyclone they fooled with, madame," he answered. "Majah Homer Butterball, sir, at your service—a reg'lar death-trap with a hair trigger. Egad! they tumbled like nine-pins when I began ter operate!"

The crowd grinned—it could not help it—and the happy major filled out like a toad and lifted himself on his toes as he rounded off his last sentence.

"Very well! I'll not mar your triumph," said Keno Kate; "but I wouldn't advise Leadville to pay the reward just yet."

The major almost darted forward.

"What's thet—not pay ther reward on ther production ov Don Frisco's corpse?" he almost yelled. "Didn't I drop ther Colorado Cut-purse?—didn't Majah Butterball fetch ther dead proof ter Leadville? Dead proof! Egad, sir, thet's a good pun!"

Keno Kate did not move, but met his excited mien with calmness and just the faintest semblance of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

"If you think so, sir, all right. I'll not break your dream," she said.

"Which means ter say thet ther man yonder isn't Don Frisco?" grated Major Butterball. "See hyer—nobody, not even a woman, shall say thet I hev'n't a claim on ther reward posted all over Leadville for Don Frisco ther mountain cut-purse, dead or alive. Nobody, I say. I know who I've finished—killed, if yer like it. Say out what's on yer tongue, an' in yer eyes. By Jerusalem! woman, Majah Butterball kin prove any contradiction a lie!"

"Well, then," said the woman, coolly. "I say that Don Frisco is not yonder."

"You?"

"I!"

"By heavens! I—I say he is!" cried the major. "It's a conspiracy to cheat me out o' ther reward—a cabal ag'in' a man who risked his life ter kill ther worst man thet ever stopped a boss. I'm not ter be euchered in thet manner. I rest my case whar it war at sundown, and I notify Leadville now thet I shall demand ther reward offered for Don Frisco dead or alive. Under ther circumstances it was impossible ter fetch 'im in alive, so dead he came ter camp, an' dead he is yet, by Jerusalem, sah!"

Keno Kate stepped toward the horse from which she had dismounted to inspect the corpses on the porch.

"D'yer say it for a fact?" exclaimed the angry major, starting toward her. "You started an' said 'heavens!' ther moment yer set eyes on thet body awhile ago, now yer say it isn't Don Frisco's."

"True, the resemblance is somewhat striking," said Keno Kate, turning and speaking coolly. "But I have a right to know the real Don Frisco. If you had killed him I might have dropped you in your boots, sir."

The mad major recoiled like a man who finds himself on the crumbling brink of a precipice.

"Heavens!"

"I mean what I say," she said, following up her startling threat. "When you kill Don Frisco you must keep away from me. I'm sorry to dissipate your hopes of reward, Major Butterball, but you haven't killed the Colorado cut-throat, and I know it."

The major stood like a man in a trance, his lips quivered, and his eyes lost their wild excitement.

"By heavens! it war a close shave for me," he ejaculated. "Ef I haven't killed Don Frisco, who is my handsome victim, gents? He wore the boss plunderer's mask, anyhow. I don't take in that woman's story. It's a set-up job ag'in' Majah Butterball—a scheme to cheat him—"

"Halt!" interrupted a voice, and at the same time there stepped in front of the major the Indian in Buckskin. "I say that you have not killed Don Frisco; the robber of the Rockies still lives. No scheme has been put up ag'in' you. The white hunter who has just faced you does not speak with a forked tongue. Don't throw a lie at her."

That was all, and it was enough. Pawnee disappeared as suddenly and as silently as he had approached, leaving the major completely cooled down and almost gasping for breath.

"Egad, sir, I'll leave this town to-night," he said. "Ef I could call them two men ter life an' put 'em on ther road ag'in' I'd do it, by Jupiter! I would, gentlemen. First a woman threatens me, then an Indian. I warn't born for this. Majah Butterball, sah, will shake ther dust o' Leadville from his boots afore ther majestic orb o' mornin' ascends proudly above ther horizon in her golden car, by heavens, sah!"

Thoroughly disgusted, the speaker turned on his heel and strode toward the hotel.

"We'll raise a purse fer what yer did do, major," said Amazon Alf.

"Give it ter yer orphans, not ter this kid!" was the snapped rejoinder. "When I beg, I'll let yer know. I'm no Lazarus, sah, blast yer eyes!" And into the building he went with a loud shout of merriment behind.

"Which way now?" asked Pawnee, when he rejoined Keno Kate.

"To Leadville Lucy. Calumet Tom says she has come back. I want to see that girl."

The Indian dropped his head and glanced at the old miner.

"She's home," he said, in response to the look, and all three started off toward the house.

Five minutes later Leadville Lucy was confronted by Don Frisco's foe, and the two women looked deeply into each other's face several seconds before either spoke.

"Leave us alone," said Keno Kate, glancing at the Indian who had followed her into the house, and when she found herself alone with Leadville Lucy, she darted forward and her hand closed suddenly on her wrist.

"Girl, is it true that you don't know who you are?" she cried.

Leadville Lucy threw into her eyes a look of amazement.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"What I have just said," was the puzzling answer. "Men call you Leadville Lucy, but don't you know that you have another name?"

"What right have I to know it?" cried the girl.

"True! He did not get to you alive; they strangled him in the mountains, and—"

The sentence was broken in a thrilling manner.

All at once the window was knocked in with a terrible crash, and into the room leaped a man who overthrew the table, extinguishing the lamp, and flew straight at Keno Kate's throat.

"By Heavens! nothin' shall cheat me out o' ther boss bonanza!" he hissed to himself, as his bronzed hand closed on the avenger's windpipe. "I play this lone hand ter win! All hell can't baffle ther Death Spider ov Texas!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

KENO KATE, A TIGRESS.

As we have heard Pawnee the Indian predict, Denver Duke came back to Leadville that night.

The Denver sport rode quietly into town, and in less than ten minutes after his arrival had heard the story about the attack on the stage, all from Calumet Tom's lips.

Pawnee was a quiet but interested listener, and when the old miner had finished, he laid his hand on Denver Duke's arm, and said, looking into his face:

"I think I know something, Denver. Thar warn't gold in Victor's valise—not gold, I say, but papers."

The Indian nodded, and raised his eyes to the young man's.

"Well, what of it?" asked the Denverite, quietly.

"A good deal when you look at it in a sartain way. Ther man who choked Lucy's brother wanted them papers," was the continuance. "They're worth their weight in gold; they tell who Lucy is; they unlock the mystery thet has bothered Leadville ever since she came hyer. Now, whar ar' they?"

Denver Duke was silent. He walked to the window as if he had heard a suspicious sound, but came back and looked down into Calumet Tom's face.

"What do you say, Tom?" he asked.

"I don't know—I'm stumped!" was the answer.

"You see no trail, eh?"

"Not a trail."

"And you, Pawnee?"

The eyes of the Indian brightened at once.

"Has my brother forgotten?" he said, with a quick glance at Calumet. "Who took Lucy off t'other night?"

"Centipede Sam."

"Who found empty valise an' carried it to Leadville?"

"Thet same hound!" cried Calumet. "Whar hev I been?—what hev I been doin'? Centipede Sam? Thet's ther devil yer drivin' at, Pawnee? By Heavens! I see through ther biggest scheme ever got up in Colorado; I find that feller at one ov his lone hands ag'in. He used ter play 'em in Texas—he's at ther same game hyer. What say you, Denver? Ther Injun has hit it, eh?"

"Yes," said Denver Duke. "Centipede Sam has cut loose from his old master, Don Frisco. He is playin' one of those deep, desperate games for which he was famous in other regions. His escape from the mob in Denver was due to some terrible will power he exercised over Roaring Rube Rattam, the miner-pard, whom he shot there. The old fellow said one thing at night, and the next morning took it all back under Centipede Sam's eye."

"An oath!" cried Calumet Tom. "One of ther oaths ther men o' thet infernal band took years ago. I know 'em well! His eye did it all; it held Roarin' Rube ter ther old oath; it saved Centipede Sam."

"There was something in his look."

"Ther oath, I tell yer!" persisted Calumet Tom. "You've looked at ther men ther galoot ov a major shot?"

"Yes."

"An' neither war ther real Don Frisco, though Butterball held out one war till Keno Kate came an' sent him an' his reward glimmerin'. Kate war almighty anxious ter see Lucy when she heard ther Queen ov Leadville bed come back. Her eagerness struck me hard; she could hardly wait till we got ter ther house."

"Well?" said Denver Duke with great eagerness.

"She's thar yet; leastwise Pawnee an' me left ther two women together awhile ago."

"I want to see Lucy," said Denver Duke.

"The interview must be ended by this time. Will you wait for me here?"

"Hyer er at Starbottle's," answered Calumet Tom.

The young Denverite went out.

Overhead myriads of stars and a big round moon were shining in the midst of an unclouded firmament. Every street in Leadville was lighted up, and had but little shade, and Denver Duke hurried toward the house which had been Leadville Lucy's home almost from the day of her coming to the capital of the Silver Hills. He found the front door slightly ajar, but rapped loud enough to attract attention.

No answer came, and Denver Duke stood for five minutes on the step waiting to be invited into the home of the Queen of Leadville.

A strange foreboding that something of evil import had happened at last took possession of his mind. The darkness and silence beyond the threshold confirmed the feeling he could not shake off.

"I'll know what it is!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"The girl is not at home, or—"

He broke his own sentence by entering the house, a cocked revolver in his hand, as if he more than half expected to meet some lurking foe.

He passed through the front room into the little apartment beyond, and stopped there. A breath of night air coming from where there was no door touched his cheek.

The next moment he took another step forward and felt his foot touch a yielding body on the floor.

"Heavens! it's the girl—Lucy!" cried Denver Duke stooping immediately, and with his hand finding a human face in the darkness. "The demon with the 'lone hand' is still at work! Woe to him if he has killed the Queen of Colorado!"

The lighting of a match was the work of a moment, and Denver Duke saw the little flame reveal the body and features of a beautiful woman extended lengthwise on the floor, near her a broken lamp, an overturned table, and fragments of broken window-sash and shattered glass.

"Not Leadville Lucy but Keno Kate!" said the young Denverite after a moment's inspection. "This woman has been choked—terribly choked; but she is not dead. There's life enough left here to tell me who did this and to reveal the whereabouts of Lucy. She must know them. She was here when the villain came in like a thunderbolt by the window."

Denver Duke righted the table and found another lamp which he lit. Then he returned to the woman on the floor.

There were marks of fingers on her throat, telling how terrible the choking had been; a little longer, and the deed would have been murder.

"I'll get at it all," mused Denver Duke as he worked with the unconscious woman. "I'm going to reach the bottom of more mystery than one. Ah! she is going to tell me all. See!"

A convulsive movement of Keno Kate's frame told the Denver sport that his efforts were soon to be crowned with success, but he did not pause until he saw the eyes of the woman fixed upon him, and in a stare which he did not like.

"It is I—Denver Duke," said the Denverite. "If I had come a little sooner this tiger play would not have happened."

"Ho! ho!" laughed Keno Kate. "The thunderbolt fell when the sky was clear. I had the queen's hand in my grasp when one of the snake-limbs turned 'round my throat—ha, ha, ha!"

The Denverite almost drew back with a cold shudder.

Was Keno Kate mad?

"Don't—don't touch me!" she went on, jerking from Denver Duke's grasp. "You may be another thunderbolt with a touch of velvet, but with fire behind your claws. No, no! stand back! He came through the window there. We two doves were together. With him came darkness and where his fingers touched me they burned! Your teeth is like his—fire! Keep off! You are the thunderbolt's brother!"

Denver Duke did not smile; the horror of woman's look kept all merriment back; no information from her.

But he would make one more trial.

"I have killed the thunderbolt that came through the window," he said, stepping toward Keno Kate. "You will tell me where Lucy—"

"Back! your fingers of fire creep toward my throat!" wildly cried the woman, shrinking to the wall, where she stood with clinched hands and flaming eyeballs. "If you are not the thunderbolt, set a trap for him. Put me on the trigger and he will come back and get caught—ho, ho! Go! this is a den and I am the tigress! If you stay I will put my velvet claws at your white throat!"

A wild and sudden bound carried the insane woman almost to the spot where Denver Duke stood. Her aspect was terrible, and he saw the fingers that opened and closed spasmodically as if itching to work their way behind his windpipe.

He naturally shrunk toward the door.

"Go, go!" she went on, following him up. "All Leadville cannot keep you out of my claws. You are the thunderbolt's brother—your fingers are fire!"

"My God! let me get away from here!" ejaculated Denver Duke. "I'd sooner face a pair of grizzlies than a woman like this. There's no information here. The hand that caught Keno Kate's throat, choked her reason out of her. What a sight this would be for Don Frisco, the demon she has hunted for years!"

The Denverite would have reached the door in another moment, if a sudden tremor had not shaken the mad woman's form, and all at once with a wild shriek she spun half-way around, threw up her hands and dropped at the foot of the table!

"Poor thing!" cried the sport, starting forward. "Hell yawns for the fiend who did this!"

"And it'll open for you if you touch that woman!" cried a voice. "Keep off, Denver Duke! You're a man with sand, but by the eternal I'll paint the walls with your brains if you help that woman. And remember that it is Don Frisco who speaks!"

Denver Duke stopped and looked out of the window, and saw that he was covered by a brace of big six-shooters.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE OUTLAW'S HATE.

THE Denver sport knew the man at a glance.

It was indeed Don Frisco, the mountain brigand.

"Don't help that woman on the floor, I say. It'll be your death if you do," continued the bandit. "I made that she tigress jump the cleft, as you know, but here she is again. Did you rescue her?"

"Not at all; I had no idea she was alive or here."

"She must have been caught somewhere 'twixt cliff an' canyon bed. Tigress she is, and dead or alive I hate her! Let her die where she is if she will. Don't touch her; she might bite you if you did, Denver Duke, an' besides, I might press the trigger. I came to Leadville for no child's play!"

The lamp burning on the table near the window showed Denver Duke the splendid figure and the coal-black, well-shaded eyes of the king road-agent of the Rockies. He could not but remark how much he resembled one of the men at that moment awaiting burial on the porch of the Grand Colorado—the man called Don Frisco by Major Butterball until Keno Kate had dissipated the illusion.

Yes, the two men, the living and the dead, were strikingly alike.

"Come here!" suddenly said Don Frisco in tones of command, yet not harshly. "Come right through the window."

Denver Duke glanced once at his own revolver, which was cocked ready for his hand, then sprang through the window and joined the desperado.

"What's her condition now, do you think?" asked Don Frisco eagerly, sending a swift glance into the room just vacated.

"She has swooned in her madness."

"Not dead, then?"

"No, only insane."

The brigand was silent for a moment.

"Did her jump, her leap over the brink of the trail, do it?"

"No; they told me she was sane when she came here to see the girl—Leadville Lucy."

"Ah! what did it, then?"

"Somebody leaped into the room by way of the window and choked her."

Don Frisco uttered an ejaculation of surprise. "Somebody?—who? Do you know?" he cried quickly.

Denver Duke looked into the desperado's face before he replied. What! tell him that he believed that Centipede Sam, one of his own band, his "right bower," had done it all? He wondered what effect the revelation would have on the mountain demon.

"Tell me, if you know," continued Don Frisco. "The person who came in at the window and choked that woman, went away with Leadville Lucy, eh?"

"I think so."

"No more; I am satisfied," said the road-agent, grinding his teeth. "I know now as much as if you had spoken his name. That man is my right bower. I know all about his lone hands. I came to Leadville for him. He choked me in the mountain 'twixt hyer an' Denver. He hasn't given up the girl. She is the key to some gold bonanza. Do you know, Denver Duke?"

The young sport slowly shook his head.

"You wouldn't tell me if you did, eh?" said Don Frisco, with a smile. "I'm the last man you'd trust with a secret of that kind, Denver. Very well; I don't blame you. War I in yer place, maybe I wouldn't trust a mountain Ishmael like me. I don't ask for the secret, though," he went on, talking faster. "I will get at it for myself. I'll snatch it from its nestin'-place above the heart of the man who possesses it!"

It was Denver Duke's time to exhibit surprise, and the road-agent of the Rockies transfixed him with inquisitive gaze, but got nothing for his pains. The countenance of Don Frisco was as unreadable as that of a statue of marble.

"Yes," he went on, "I'll get at that secret. Men may hunt Don Frisco while he hunts the key to the gold bonanza. They thought they had the gold dragon of the black mask a while ago. Hal! hal! the little chunk of humanity who calls himself Major Butterball, thought he had finished the career of Don Frisco. He killed Quartz an' Mountain Rock, but not this mountain chick. I ought to go up an' shoot the major over his whisky, but—no. Rock an' Quartz left me—turned back to plunder the stage, an' got passports for eternity with their boots on. Served 'em right! But whar is the major?"

"Somewhere about the Colorado, if he hasn't left town."

"An' the man who rescued Keno Kate after her leap? You say you didn't do it?"

"I did not."

"Who did, then—that infernal Injun in buckskin?"

"Yes."

Don Frisco made no immediate reply.

"My traitor first," he said, under his breath; "the buckskin afterward!"

Suddenly he turned upon Denver Duke, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"We need not be enemies—not enemies enough to shoot each other on sight," he said. "You can go an' tell Leadville that you have seen Don Frisco within her limits since sundown; you can

put all the haters hyer on my trail. Show them whar you saw me last an' point them to me. You can go up the Colorado an' tell 'em all thar that I am within huntin' distance; you can set all the minions of this silver camp at my heels. I do not say you shall not. I will not say that I will shoot you if you do. But, by the Heavens above us! Denver Duke, if you go back into that house to succor the white tigress thar an' I find it out, I'll hunt you down an' shoot you on sight! Between that woman an' Don Frisco runs a shoreless river of eternal hatred! Her friends an' my enemies—her helpers objects for my revenge. You may ask why. I could tell you, but not now nor hyer. She may die in her swoon. I hope to Heaven that she may never open her eyes again to sanity or life. She has hunted me. I will surely hunt her. Thar! go up thar an' tell 'em that Don Frisco is in Leadville. Set all the hellions of this rough camp on my trail; but touch or succor Keno Kate, as she is called, an' feel the deadly vengeance of the man who hates her!"

Denver Duke heard the last words fall from the speaker like drops of water upon heated iron; he saw his hand point toward the Grand Colorado, and then watched him step back and leave him alone and free.

"A strange rough, and almost as mad as Keno Kate," murmured the Denverite. "He knows something about the secret that puzzles us all, the mystery that is connected with the contents of Victor's valise. He hunts Centipede Sam. I must hunt him, too. We three must strike the trail before he finds it. Lucy's happiness—her life, even, hangs on the lone hand this desperado from Texas is playing in the teeth of us all."

Don Frisco had walked away and quietly disappeared, and Denver Duke turned back from the house.

"It is cruel to leave Keno Kate in the condition she is in," he said to himself. "I am to be dropped in my boots if I go back to succor her, eh? By Heavens! Don Frisco, I will not leave her thus. She was Leadville Lucy's friend. I will not desert her now."

Drawing his revolver, Denver Duke stopped suddenly and then walked back toward the house.

"It is disobeying you, Don Frisco—it is throwing a challenge into your teeth. May Denver never see me again if I desert a woman in her need."

The little house stood in the moonlight as if inviting the dandy sport, and he marched boldly toward it, his handsome figure an excellent target in the mellow beams of the queen of night.

It seemed tempting death to go back after the terrible threat of the mountain cut-purse.

But Denver Duke kept on his way and reached the threshold.

"That's far enough!" rung out a stern voice. "You'd disregard a message from the eternal world, Denver Duke!"

The man from Denver did not turn; he threw over his shoulder the words:

"Yes; and a threat from Tartarus!" and plunged into the house!

"Brave as a lion!" exclaimed the man who had called a halt. "Quick as a cat, too. Let him find her. 'Twill only delay my stroke a little while. Denver Duke, the hand that touches Keno Kate shall drop in death before long. Let me go back to the Death Spider now. I will play a lone hand as deadly as his. I will find the gold bonanza when his fingers stiffen about the butts of his revolvers. I ought to thank you, Centipede Sam, for chokin' into insanity the woman—the white tigress—I hate; but I'll overlook that favor an' shoot you for playin' the lone hand. I never go back to the road ag'in. From to-night I am Don Frisco the traitor-hunter—Don Frisco the mountain Ishmael who will reap the reward of the Centipede's hunt. Were I not on a private mission, I'd like to have all Leadville howlin' at my heels! It would remind me of old times!"

And away he went, leaving Denver Duke to help in any way he could the woman he hated.

A few yards from the house the desperado found a horse, his own, but did not mount.

"Come, Surefoot," he said to the animal. "We'll tap Poker Phil's bottle before we vamose this silver ranch."

The horse followed him down the street and up to the front of the famous place kept by Poker Phil with whom we presume the reader feels himself slightly acquainted.

With the coolness of a thorough villain, Don Frisco threw wide the shutter-like door of bottle-green and strode into the place.

"Yer best, Poker Philip," he demanded striding up to the counter.

The genius of the den straightened in an instant, and glanced at once from the visitor to the masked portrait of the gold dragon behind the bar.

"That's who I am!" continued the sport. "I'm Don Frisco. Waltz forth yer paradise fluid."

Poker Phil had two navies lying on the shelf behind him, and a sudden thought flashed through his brain.

He turned and put out a hand toward the bottles, but all at once his fingers closed on the butt of one of the revolvers.

"The essence of life, Philip, not the messenger of death!" rung in his ears, accompanied by the click of a pistol. "Quick! I'm dyin' for a drink!"

The hand of Poker Phil left the revolver and clutched a bottle and the next moment decanter and glass sat before the outlaw.

He watched the bartender with one eye as he drank, and throwing a dollar on the counter, he turned and walked out.

"Jerusalem!" cried Poker Phil. "Let 'im go. I can't blow on as cool a man as that."

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE SPIDER'S WEB.

OUR scenes shift and the stage is no longer the capital of the Silver Hills, but the secret trail of the Rockies.

The "thunderbolt," as insane Keno Kate has designated the man who leaped through the window of Leadville Lucy's house, had escaped with the fairest booty robber ever obtained.

We need not inform the reader that where he was best known he was called the Death Spider of Texas, and a man famous for his lone hands.

The possession of the Queen of Leadville was to hold "the key" to a golden bonanza of some kind; she was strangely connected with the papers taken from the valise of the brother garrotted by some desperado's fingers in the stage-coach, and Centipede Sam knew that without the girl in his clutches, he could not play the "lone hand" through to success.

Morning was lighting up the depths of the Rockies when two persons came suddenly into a lofty walled defile, and pushed slowly toward the west.

If the trail had been wider and free from rough rocks that continually bothered the horse's feet, the couple would have proceeded at a faster gait; but the way was little better than a bridle-path, and it wound among the wooded slopes like the path of a serpent.

The Death Spider and his prize—Centipede Sam and Leadville Lucy!

It was not to Denver now; no, the player of the lone hand knew better than to go back to the place where he had shot Roaring Rube Rattam, and from whose mob he had escaped by the skin of his teeth. Denver had no interest for him now; his playground lay far beyond the Rockies, nearer the gold coast than the rival cities of Colorado.

He had more than choked Keno Kit into insensibility and insanity; he had secured Leadville Lucy once more, and near his heart he still carried the important papers that would clinch certain assertions which he intended to make in the near future.

As the mountain trail was wide enough for two horses abreast, Centipede Sam and the girl rode side by side.

More than once Leadville Lucy glanced at him, always to compress her lips, and to give him a flash of resentment from her expressive eyes.

All at once the girl reined in her steed.

"No halt hyer, my Colorado rose," said Centipede Sam, frowning. "We haven't reached our destination."

"Not yours, perhaps," was the response. "You dare not tell me where it is."

"It's between hyer an' ther sea," laughed the desperado. "You would not b'lieve me when I told yer in Denver that I would show yer ther trail ye've sworn ter follow to ther end."

"I did!" cried the girl. "I did b'lieve that you were Yuba Dave till I heard Roaring Rube, your old pard, speak your true name—Centipede Sam. When you enticed me from Leadville you dared not tell me that you were the Death Spider of Texas."

The desperado grinned, but made no answer. "That smile is your triumph, is it not?" Leadville Lucy went on. "The desire to find the fiend who throttled Victor and sent him to me dead and empty-handed, made me believe your infamous falsehood. I am undeceived now. I know that you are not Yuba Dave; that you are playing one of those games which made you famous long before we met. I am not your dupe, but your prisoner—remember that, Centipede Sam! and while you are about it, recollect too, that I have sworn to avenge the blood of Victor, my brother."

Centipede Sam only shut his lips and looked the girl defiantly in the eye.

"Yours is a deep game. It was planned before you ever saw me. Heaven knows what first put you on the track of the prize you want. I knew nothing of it before you came to Leadville. I only knew that Victor would come some day. I did not think that he would bring with him papers that would cost him his life."

"Ha! what's that?" ejaculated the Death Spider, leaning suddenly forward and fixing his eyes on his lovely young captive. "You knew he would come some day, eh? You were lookin' for him, war you?"

"Not exactly looking for him," answered Lucy.

"Why, not a man in Leadville knew you had a brother?"

"Why should I tell the town? It was no concern of theirs," said the girl.

"Mebbe not," laughed Centipede Sam.

"Thet war one secret well kept, Lucy. Some one must hev known thet Victor war comin' ter you."

"The man who took his life knew."

"How, girl?"

"I know not, but he knew. The dark finger-marks I saw on his throat and the empty valise tell the story of his guilty knowledge."

"What if Victor had reached you safe an' sound?"

"I cannot tell you what would have followed. We had not met since we were children, but I knew him."

"Mebbe," ventured Centipede Sam. "Mebbe, arter all, girl, he war not yer brother."

"He was; the hand that killed him knew it. You know it, Centipede Sam!"

The Death Spider recoiled in his saddle.

"I, Lucy?"

"You!" she cried. "That hand—that dark right hand of yours, Centipede Sam, knew thet Victor was my brother! Keep it where it is that I may see it—that I may think of the oath I took over the corpse that same hand sent into Leadville when I looked for a living body! That hand knew we were brother and sister. Would to God, Centipede Sam, your career had ended years ago on the southwest border!"

The desperado was astounded by the girl's excited mien.

"Ha! you think, then, that I know something about how Victor died?" he said.

"Think?—I am certain of it," was the swift retort. "Have I not just said that that right hand sent a corpse into Leadville a few nights ago? What bolder accusation do you want? I have found the man against whom I have sworn. Victor rode into the web of the Texan Spider and never passed out alive! And it was all for the contents of his valise—all for a few papers that are valuable to you because they can unlock the doors of fortune. Go on! play the game out, Centipede Sam. By the God above me! I will see that you fail. I will stand between you and the gateway to the 'big bonanza,'—the hand of Leadville Lucy, Victor's sister, will baffle the hand the Texan Spider at present holds."

"By Jerusalem! they'd give yer five hundred a night in Frisco!" laughed Centipede Sam. "I never thought thar war thet much good actin' in ther queen ov ther old silver camp. Yer compliments, girl, ar' received with pleasure. Thar's ther hand you say once choked a man in a stage-coach for a few old papers," and the Texan held up his right hand before the girl's gaze. "Does it look like a choker, my Colorado lily? Blood on it, eh? I see none—not a drop. You've gone off half-cocked, Leadville Lucy. I am more than Yuba Dave; I'm Centipede Sam, eh? Wal, whatever I am, know you that I never fail to win when I enter a game with a lone hand. No, my girl. All ther inhabitants of that region where water never freezes can't eucher this chick ov ther Sou'west border. A gold bonanza, eh? Yes, an' ther biggest one 'twixt Leadville an' ther coast. Oh! I'm goin' ter git thar; not ter-day, nor ter-morrow, mebbe—but in the end! Digest thet, Lucy, my queen! When I play ther final card, I'll rake in ther largest pot ever played for west o' ther Missouri!"

"We will see," said the girl quietly, when she had heard the bronzed desperado through. "Now that I know—now that I have found, I will also play a hand!"

"You!" cried the Texan. "You—a girl!—play ag'in' me!"

"Yes."

"Let ther game perceed!" he laughed, loudly. "Ho, ho! throw down yer kerd, girl, an' see me trump it with a part ov my lone hand. By Jupiter! it's worth laughin' over. A girl playin' ag'in' Centipede Sam! A woman fightin' ther Death Spider ov Texas in ther web thet's already caught her! Ha, ha, ha!" and the big desperado-sport leaned back in his Mexican saddle and laughed till the mountains were filled with the echo.

Unarmed as she was, Leadville Lucy could only watch him from her own steed, and strike him with a look that seemed almost powerful enough to kill.

She might have wheeled and dashed away while he laughed; she could have left him there alone and deep in the shadows of the Rockies—but she did not. She saw her opportunity; she even fancied that she could have found the way back to Leadville, but not a move did she make.

"No," she muttered; "I stay with you to the end of this game, Death Spider. Now that I have found the hand that throttled Victor, I do not turn back until I have baffled it. Heaven give me strength to keep up with this desperate villain! He belongs to me. He has left his chief, Don Frisco, to carry out his own ends. He shall fail."

The desperado's laugh ended even while these words flashed across the girl's mind.

"Thinkin' ov beatin' me, eh?" he said, leaning toward her again. "Why, girl, that's one ov ther impossible things. We ar' movin' now toward ther gold bonanza, an' when I git ter playin' in earnest for it, you'll know some secrets which yer don't know now."

"Secrets kept by the papers found in Victor's valise?" cried the girl.

"Who said so?" laughed Centipede Sam. "Back ter ther valise ag'in, I see. Look! hev I ther papers? Whar ar' they, Lucy?"

He straightened and threw back his embroidered jacket and laughed while his prisoner looked.

She saw that nothing was secreted in the garment; there was an inside pocket, but it was the sheath of a bowie. If the Death Spider had opened his dark shirt bosom the eyes of Leadville Lucy might have sprung from her head.

"You look in vain, you see," he went on resuming his old position. "Mebbe ye'r on ther wrong trail, arter all. I've known persons ter trail a fox an' find nothin' but an old den thet yielded no fur. Make up yer mind, Lucy, ter one thing—thet if ther is a bonanza at ther end ov our journey, I'm likely ter enjoy ther heft ov it. Ther coast an' Frisco ar' before us, Leadville behind. Come! we move toward ther former!"

He leaned forward suddenly and clutched the bridle-rein of the girl's steed.

The next moment he spoke to the horses in a manner that started them forward, and side by side they galloped over the mountain trail toward the last turns of the desperate cards.

"She never beats this chick," hissed Centipede Sam. "If I lose, she dies! Ther men behind me shall never rake in ther pot!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

OUTLAW AGAINST OUTLAW.

THE men behind him!

It could not be that Centipede Sam knew to a certainty that he was actually followed, yet, the character of his last exploit in Leadville was of such a nature as to make him a hunted man.

And he was followed.

Riding over the mountain trail on a powerful horse that bore him along without the least seeming effort was a man whose eyes spoke the eagerness that tugged at his heart.

He was alone, and as far back as he could look he saw no one coming after him, and nobody ahead was in sight.

Don Frisco was on the trail of his traitor. He had left Leadville with the choked insane woman on the floor of Lucy's home, and, with teeth firm set, had thrown himself on the Death Spider's trail.

"I've got nothin' to keep me back thar now," said the king of cut-purses, nodding toward Leadville. "Ther prize is before me. Who thought that Leadville beauty was to be a livin' key to a bonanza? Nobody but you, Centipede Sam! Yo'r' always findin' out somethin', always huntin' for an opportunity to play yer accursed 'lone hand.' But I'll play mine, mebbe—hand ag'in' hand!"

Thus talked and laughed the black-eyed, dark-faced and long-haired man who went over the Rockies, rising and falling in his saddle as the trail rose or descended, with a coil of black rope at his saddle, and a brace of revolvers in easy reach.

Don Frisco seldom turned hunter, but there were living men who knew that when he did hunt, he never left the trail until he stood at the end of it triumphant. The records of the various bands of cut-throats which he had commanded in his lifetime were proofs of his character; he had left his mark in more than one part of the new wild West and Southwest, and more than one curse was stored against him.

He seemed to press on through the mountains with no perceptible regard for the road he traversed. As if he knew just where he was to find Centipede Sam, he let his horse gallop forward, noting not the formation of the mountains, but keeping his mind and his eye directly ahead.

The time came when he left the depths of the great range of the West, and Don Frisco rode down the sloping trail with his eyes riveted on the ground his horse trod.

Centipede Sam had not much the start of his persistent captain. True, an hour is much to one pursued by an implacable enemy, but a good horse wonderfully shortens that brief space of time. It was so with Don Frisco; he made the hour or two comparatively no time at all.

Far from Leadville with the wooded tops of the Rockies behind him, Don Frisco came up with his man, not quite up to the Death Spider, but near enough to see that his ride and his pursuit had not been over the wrong trail.

The king of cut-purses was still above his old pard, but he saw him plainly. Circumstances had forced Centipede Sam to move slow.

The horse ridden by Leadville Lucy was walking almost painfully over the trail, and the strong hand of the Death Spider was holding a wearied and sleeping girl on the saddle.

No thought of the man behind him filled Centipede's mind; Don Frisco was the last person he expected to encounter in that part of the country.

"Doesn't expect me!" laughed the gold dragon as he gazed down upon the two people moving slowly over the trail. "Centipede Sam thinks thet the big bonanza is safe now. The mountains ar' at his back an' he is enterin' a lower country which reaches to the last chain between

him an' the gold coast. Move on, old fellow, but keep yer eyes open. An old eagle is on yer track, an' the eyes ov a wary old bird will not lose sight of you!"

Don Frisco did not quicken his pace; his sharp vision had detected that the girl's horse was lame and he knew that, fearless of pursuit, now Centipede Sam was letting the animal move slowly in order to recruit.

There was something exciting in one man thus following another down the shaded trails of the Rockies. The scene had been enacted before, perhaps over the same trail, but it was now invested with a thrilling interest for the fortunes of a young girl depended on the outcome of the chase.

Night was gradually spreading her wings over the wild region, the sun was about to sink behind the distant peaks and ere long the cricket would begin his twilight song.

Still, it was light enough for eyes like Don Frisco's to keep Centipede Sam in sight. Now and then a little group of trees or a projecting "shoulder" would hide him and his victim, but it was only for a moment; the couple would appear again.

"Hello! they're goin' to rest!" suddenly exclaimed the tracker, seeing the Death Spider slide to the ground and turn to the girl who had awakened. "That is right; give yer old captain a chance, Centipede. Make yer camp hyer ef yer dare. Desert ther Queen ov Leadville for a minute, an' we'll see whose lone hand wins. Ah! yes, fool; give Don Frisco a chance!"

As if to please his watcher, Centipede Sam lifted Leadville Lucy from the saddle and threw a blanket on the ground for her.

"Is this our camp?" asked the girl. "Mebbe so," was the answer. "What's ther use ov rushin' on ter ther bonanza? It's thar for us an' isn't likely ter take wings."

There was no answer, for sleep had taken a firm hold on the Texan's prisoner; she walked mechanically to the blanket which had been cast upon a little spot of velvet grass and lay down. Centipede Sam watched her fall asleep.

"Worth it all, ain't she?" he exclaimed, looking down into Leadville Lucy's face. "Heavens! what'll they think ov ther lay-out when I walk up with ther papers an' ther girl? Thar'll be growlin', mebbe a show ov teeth, an' mebbe a glitter ov steel; but what'll thet all amount ter? When I say 'fork over, gents,' ther bonanza will be forthcomin'. Oh, what a grand 'lone hand!' Man nor devil never held one like it!"

He laughed while he looked at his beautiful prisoner. If he had raised his eyes and looked up the mountain, he might have caught sight of the man who was watching him from the saddle.

"I can't go down on him by this trail," muttered Don Frisco. "Thar ar' too many loose rocks in it, an' they'd give me away. Besides, I know that man. He catches sounds whar ther fox'd hear nothin'. Ah! nobody knows ther Death Spider ov Texas better than his old trainer!"

Five minutes later Don Frisco dismounted, crept down toward the silent little camp almost at the foot of the mountains. He did not trust himself to go down the main trail, not even when he traveled afoot, but he had found another trail which, while it did not lead straight to Centipede Sam, led to the same level he occupied.

"We'll see afore day who's ther best chance for ther mysterious bonanza!" chuckled Don Frisco. "When ther Leadvillers come up they'll find ther vultures hoverin' over ther player ov ther lone hand, an' I'll be far away—with bigger an' prettier game than I've hunted in many a day."

Don Frisco made his descent with care. He knew that the least sound would put the Texan on the alert. It was outlaw against outlaw, cunning to cunning, and the captain matched against his traitor subordinate.

The Indian in Buckskin—Pawnee—could not have crept over the ground with more caution than that displayed by the chief of the mountain plunderers. It was evidently not the captain's first crawl upon an enemy.

When he reached a level with Centipede Sam's improvised camp he lost sight of his quarry. A number of trees, a bend in the narrow trail intervened, and over all had fallen the mantle of night. But overhead a number of stars shone brilliantly, and among them a full round moon was hanging.

Don Frisco paused for a little while to perfect the surprise he had planned.

The ground between him and the Death Spider's camp was new and untraveled. He had to move forward foot by foot, pushing his way through young mountain bushes and always on the alert.

What if the fox should hear him?—what if he should meet the desperate bonanza hunter half way. Don Frisco thought of this.

"Let him come. By heavens! I wish he would!" he ejaculated. "I'll throw my old pard with a slit throat to the shades of the rocks!"

Don Frisco moved forward with all his plans formed. He knew where the camp was; he had

marked the position from the starting-point, and believed that he could count the steps to it.

The bushes yielded kindly to the swarthy hunter's hands.

His way was carpeted with the soft grass found in out-of-the-way places among the mountains, and no dry twigs snapped under his feet.

"I beat ther snake," he said thinking of his noiseless progress. "A sleepin' fox wouldn't hear me. Centipede Sam—fool! feels ther bonanza in his hands!"

All at once Don Frisco stopped. A sound wholly indescribable but something like a groan came down from where he had left his horse. He listened several minutes, but it was not repeated.

Then he crept on again, in his hand a cocked revolver, in his eyes, watchfulness.

"Now, whar ar' you, Centipede?" he whispered leaning forward. "Show me yer carkiss, an' I'll show ther moon ther interior ov a traitor's skull!"

He had reached the camp and now he leaned toward it eager to see the man who had halted there.

But not a sound came from the spot to reward Don Frisco, not a figure met his searching gaze.

"Did ther g'loot hear me?" he exclaimed. "Hev ther birds flown ter another roost? I made no noise. I didn't hear my own steps!"

He went forward with a bound and landed suddenly on the spot where the camp had been. It was vacant!

A mad oath parted Don Frisco's lips.

"Gone! By heavens! Centipede Sam, ye'r a slick one!"

Five minutes later he walked suddenly to the spot where he had left his horse. Here another terrible discovery awaited him.

His own steed had been exchanged for another, and the throat of that animal was cut from ear to ear! Centipede Sam had been there.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DESPOILING THE SPOILER.

"WHAT if I should tell you that we are near, very near, the quarry?"

"Nigh him ter-night?"

"Yes."

"Wal, I should say, Denver Duke, that I'm surprised. We hev'n't found him, eh?"

"We have."

"An' Leadville Lucy?"

"No."

"Then, ther trail's not ended. It ends, you know, whar she is."

"I know that. I have sworn, Calumet, to find the Death Spider of Texas, and to find also the Queen of Leadville. Wait till Pawnee comes back, and listen to the Injun's report."

A few minutes later there walked into the little camp among the mountains a dark-faced athlete, clothed in buckskin, with a cool eye in his head.

"There he is; ask him," said Denver Duke nodding toward the Leadville red-skin.

Calumet Tom called the Indian to him.

"What do you say, Pawnee?" he asked eagerly. "Have you found the man who quitted Leadville one month ago with Leadville Lucy?"

The eyes of the red trailer instantly brightened, and he threw a quick glance at the Denver Sport.

"Pawnee has just come from the silver campers. He has found the trail of the Death Spider," he said quietly.

"Ov Centipede Sam? What stops him hyer?" cried Calumet Tom. "The big bonanza isn't in this region. Is he goin' ter play out his lone hand hyer?"

"That is to be discovered," answered Denver Duke. "Pawnee has seen what I have seen. Centipede Sam is an inhabitant of the camp down yonder. Something has stopped him in this region. He seems at home, as if he was acquainted with the pards of the camp. He is alone; the girl has disappeared."

"Lost'er, mebbe," ejaculated Calumet Tom.

At that moment the Death Spider of Texas was an occupant of a wild camp which was separated from Leadville by the Rockies and much wild land.

Bullet Bar was a place which had a record not unlike that possessed by more than one mining-camp deep in the land of buried fortunes. Thirty cabins made up the place, and they were huddled together like sheep in a pen; their owners were veritable mountain roughs, lawless as outlaws, and with the temper of wolves.

It was to this place that the three men, Denver Duke, Calumet Tom and the Indian in buckskin had tracked Centipede Sam, and the puzzle was why had he stopped among its denizens when he was believed to possess the important papers found in the valise of Lucy's brother Victor?

Night had crept down upon Bullet Bar like a robber, and in one of the cabins sat three roughly-dressed men on three-legged stools and around a small table. A deck of greasy cards which had seen much service was affording them one of the amusements peculiar to the sil-

ver camps, and the lamp fastened against the wall overhead afforded light enough for the game.

One of these men was Centipede Sam, unchanged by his mountain ride, and he laughed with his companions as the cards fell from his hand, for when the Death Spider played, it was with all his might.

The game had been going on since sundown, though but little money had changed hands. At different times two men had looked in upon the gamblers—first Denver Duke, then Pawnee.

There could be no mistake; one of the players was Centipede Sam, but what had become of Lucy?

The game continued till the young moon crept down the sky, and then it was broken up by mutual consent. The three gamblers went to the cabin door and the Death Spider bade the other two good-night.

"I know it now," said one of the pair in a whisper while he glanced at the Texan walking away. "Thar's papers under that feller's shirt. He had 'em when he came hyer, an' he guards 'em well. A gold map, mebbe, Bloss, or ther key ter some bonanza bigger than any round Bullet Bar."

"I shouldn't be surprised," was the answer. "He's a tough one, though."

"As a knot! But what does thet matter? That man goin' yonder isn't stoppin' hyer for sport. He came two weeks ago; he leaves ther camp twixt two days, but allus comes back. I say foller him. It may be our chance for a bonanza, Bloss. He may move on to-morrow; then ther game would be lost—ther cards played for nothin'. I'll try it."

The speaker stepped back into the cabin and slipped off the heavy boots he wore, substituting a pair of softer ones with soles almost as soft as the soles of moccasins.

"I'm goin' ter get at his secret, for I'll swar he has one," this individual went on. "You needn't take part in ther creep, Bloss, if yer don't want ter. What's ther use ov inhabitin' this mountain almshouse when a bonanza ov some kind may be had for reachin' out yer hands? Fortune sent 'im hyer for us, mebbe. Why let 'im go?"

Bloss cast a glance toward Centipede Sam who had disappeared and then looked down at his boots.

"Stay hyer," said his companion. "Let me track him down. It'll not be ther first time Gilded George did this kind o' work. It shall be an equal divide, Bloss. I never miss my guess on a man. Thet one carries a bonanza on his person. We must hev it—we, ther poverty seraphs ov Bullet Bar."

A minute later Bloss found himself alone, for Gilded George had sprung after Centipede Sam with the noiselessness and agility of a panther, and already had disappeared.

"Big an' tough he is an' so am I," ejaculated the citizen of the Bar. "Don't I know when a man's got suthin' on his string? Catch this weasel asleep, will yer?"

Centipede Sam had already passed the group of cabins which made up the little camp, and was moving toward the mountain near whose base Bullet Bar stood.

"They'll never look for me hyer," he murmured. "They think me pushing on toward California an' nobody dreams ov ther existence of this restin'-place. It is not on ther map for it ain't a year old. I happened onto it by an accident. I heard ov it by ther merest chance, an' I knew it war ther place ter rest at, while I throwed ther men behind me off ther scent."

Gliding down upon him from shadow to shadow with eyes that fairly blazed, came Gilded George of Bullet Bar. The right hand of the dark-faced athlete rested on the butt of a revolver and with cat-like strides he crept upon the supposed possessor of the big bonanza.

All at once Centipede Sam stopped.

"What makes me think I'm follered?" he asked himself. "I don't hear anything, but I feel suthin'—I can't tell what. If I am bounded hyer I'll make it interestin' for ther tracker—I'll show him a part ov thet lone hand thet never failed ter win a game."

The Death Spider of Texas stopped and listened. A huge boulder was between him and the camp he had just left and its substance and shadow shielded him from observation. Not unarmed did he listen. His fingers wound around the butt of an eight-inch bowie, and he waited breathlessly for some one, he knew not whom, to come up.

Almost suddenly there appeared in the little gleam of moonlight on the ground beyond the boulder the figure of a man his equal in proportions and armed like himself.

"After ther little stake I won in yer cabin, eh?" ejaculated the hunted Texan, glaring at the advancing figure. "Come a little nearer, Gilded George, an' I'll give ye yer silver back with ther interest, in steel. What I win I ginerally keep; but when a loser squeals, I allus pay 'im back."

Centipede Sam watched the man of Bullet Bar with the eye of a hawk. He knew that three strides would bring him up to his station, and he made ready to surprise him.

"Want yer money, eh?" suddenly exclaimed

the Texan, stepping so unexpectedly into the rough's path that he recoiled with an exclamation of astonishment. "Do all men squeal this way at Bullet Bar?"

Gilded George seemed knocked completely "out of time" by this startling confrontation. The hunted tiger had turned on him; Centipede Sam, known at the Bar as Leadville Lou, must have heard his steps.

"Who says I squeal?" demanded Gilded George, recovering from his surprise as soon as possible.

"I do. Why d'yer track me ef yer don't squeal? Want yer losses, eh? Wal, I always pay squealers; I pity them, I do."

Centipede Sam thrust one hand into the depths of a pantaloons pocket, but did not relinquish his hold on the knife he clutched.

"Keep yer coin; I don't want it!" cried Gilded George.

"You follered me for it."

"No."

"Don't go back on it, Gilded. War it fifty or seventy? An' yer want Bloss's losses too, eh? Why didn't thet squealer come along?"

"Thar! thet's enough ov thet!" cried the man of Bullet Bar. "No man ever called Gilded George a squealer afore ter-night!"

"Didn't, eh? Mebbe it war because they never found yer out," laughed the Texan. "When I'm follered from ther kerd-table by a loser, I allus know what he wants."

"But you don't know what I want," persisted Gilded George.

"Money."

"No—suthin' worth more than all I've lost ter-night."

"Revenge?"

"More than thet, even."

"Then—"

Gilded George dashed at the Texan with the suddenness of an arrow shot from an Indian bow. His was a spring for which the most agile could not prepare.

"I want what's back o' yer shirt!" he hissed, as he landed against Centipede Sam and threw back his knife arm with one hand, while with the other he clutched his throat. "You hev'n't fooled Gilded George, Leadville Lou. No man carries worthless papers next ter his heart. I never foller a man ter rekiver ther money his 'hands' hez won. Gilded George is above thet. I want paper—not coin!"

The attack seemed to lend Centipede Sam the strength of two athletes; the peril of the papers nestling near his heart armed him with threefold power. He shut his teeth till they cracked, and met the impetuous tough with strength sufficient to conquer in any contest.

But he had a terrible antagonist, and he soon realized that at last, in the boss rough of Bullet Bar, he had found a foe who, with the ferocity of a tiger, combined the strength of a lion.

The two roughs struggled for the mastery in the mountain path. Neither could get at their weapons, for both hands were kept employed.

"Yer didn't hev ter come hyer, Leadville!" cried Gilded George. "You warn't obliged ter j'ine the poverty seraphs ov Bullet Bar. Ther moment I inspected you, I said: 'Thar's more under thet man's shirt-front than a human heart' and thar is."

"More than you'll ever git!"

Where were the three pards, that they did not interfere in the battle of the desperadoes?

Suddenly the twain went to the ground, Centipede Sam underneath, with the weight of the Bullet Bar rough upon him.

"Ther papers, er yer life!" cried Gilded George.

"My life first!"

"Then Bullet Bar takes both!"

Gilded George tore loose the clutch of the Texan Spider, and beat down his arm; then he snatched up his own knife, which had fallen on the trail.

The Death Spider saw the gleam of the eight-inch blade, and made a desperate attempt to avoid the threatened stroke; but in vain!

Driven downward by the strength of Gilded George's arm, the bowie's blade descended, and tore the Texan's lips apart with a gasp.

"They're worth more than life—ther dockermments ar'," said Gilded George, feeling the hand of his foe relax. "No, no; Leadville Lou, I didn't want my money back, but the key ov yer gold bonanza!"

With the eagerness of a robber the man of Bullet Bar tore open the dark shirt of his foe and thrust in his hand.

"I thought so!" he ejaculated. "They don't fool Gilded George, ov Bullet Bar. Fortune fetched this bonanza pigeon hyer for pluckin'!"

He turned back to the camp with a package in his hand. No look did he cast over his shoulder. What was the use? He had struck once with the bowie—that was enough.

Ten minutes later he burst into a cabin and threw the prize upon a rough table.

"Thar, Bloss! I told yer so," he said to the man who had waited for him. "If I'm not mistaken thet red string lassoes a reg'lar bonanza thet'll make us gold or silver kings ov this kentry."

The fingers of Bloss had already pounced upon the prize obtained at the point of a bowie, and

he quickly cut the string, letting the discolored papers fall apart on the table.

"Now let's cipher it out," continued Gilded George, drawing one of the three-legged stools up to the table. "Go through ther dockermments one by one. See ef thar ain't a gold map among 'em."

For some minutes the two swarthy pards of Bullet Bar looked through the papers, when Bloss leaped to his feet with a wild exclamation.

"By Jupiter! it's ther key ter ther Cleburne Bonanza!" he cried.

"What's thet?" asked Gilded George astonished.

"A fortune thet'd stagger you ef it war all poured out afore yer feet. I've heard ov it afore; but not in Bullet Bar, ye kin bet yer life. But it's worth nothin' without ther girl."

"What girl?"

"Old Gin'ral Cleburne's heiress!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BLOSS BEGINS A GAME.

GILDED GEORGE sprung to his feet as he put the question that produced Bloss's somewhat startling answer.

"Not old Cleburne, ther man who once war said ter own a dozen bonanzas?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"He never hed a child thet I ever heard ov."

"What does thet paper say? Look at it—take it all in, from ther first line ter ther name scratched at ther bottom," and Bloss held a piece of paper covered with writing before Gilded George's eyes. "Thet's a will—Gin'ral Cleburne's will! It talks about two children—a boy an' a girl. Did you ever hear it said that ther old galoot married a woman in Mexico?"

"No. I never heard much about him, only thet he war a gold king."

"Wal, I hev. Thet's ther will, I say."

"The—deuce!"

"It's nothin' else but thet. Now, whar's ther children?"

"Hang me, if I know."

"Hold! Don't you think, Gilded George, that ther man what hed these papers in his bosom knows suthin' about ther whereabouts? He's more than Leadville Lou. He wouldn't be runnin' over this region with dockermments like these unless he hed a pretty tight grip on ther bonanza."

"Right! thet's so!" cried Gilded George. "Mebbe he's got a breath in him yet. A girl an' a boy you say? By heavens! I'll choke out o' him all he knows."

Gilded George was now at the door, and the next minute he had thrown it open and was streaking it toward the spot where he had left Centipede Sam after the battle for the papers.

Bloss of Bullet Bar was left alone.

"Who ever thought these papers'd fall inter our hands?" he said, moving his big bronzed hand among the old documents while his eyes glared at the pile, full of greed. "Let me git my fingers on ther two heirs, an' I'll resign as one of ther poverty seraphs ov Bullet Bar! What information will George git? What if he finds out? He may not want ter divide. Heavens! I never thought ov thet."

Bloss snatched up the papers and thrusting them beneath his jacket sprung toward the door, but on its threshold he checked himself.

"I'll stay hyer an' watch 'im," he said.

"Without what I hold he can do nothin'. My opinion is thet Bloss of Bullet Bar holds ther best hand in this game. Jehu! what kerd I grip an' how this mountain pauper will play 'em!"

Meanwhile, Gilded George was rapidly nearing the place where he expected to find the man called Leadville Lou. He knew it well.

"Hyar I am, but no man!" he suddenly ejaculated halting on the scene of the contest for the documents. "Didn't I finish him with that eight inches ov steel?"

It was plain that Centipede Sam had disappeared, for the place where Gilded George had left the body was deserted, and the moonlight bathed it in romantic beauty.

"No man! no trail!" continued the man of Bullet Bar stooping and examining the ground with ravenous eyes. "A cut like he got must make a blood trail. He can't get off without a red track. I've tracked too many wounded men in my time."

Gilded George did not let anything escape his keen vision. He crawled over the ground on all-fours feeling the grass with his hands which he examined constantly for blood-stains.

But he was not rewarded.

"Hang it! I must get Bloss at this," he said. "He discovered thet ther papers mean a big bonanza for us an' he will find whar Leadville Lou is. Why didn't he come with me? Ther girl an' boy must be found an' then made a part ov ther hand ther poverty seraphs ov Bullet Bar will play. I've heard ov bonanzas fallin' from ther skies, but this ar' ther only one I kin certify ter doin' it. You hed more than them papers, Leadville Lou; you knew whar ther heirs ar'. I'll bet my life on thet!"

Gilded George turned on his heel and started back toward the wild camp. Bloss with his coolness, his shrewdness and nerve, must be put

forward on the lost trail. Gilded George had great respect for his pard's ability, and now that the key of a monster bonanza was almost within their grip they must not fail. This unexpected wind-fall lent new speed to the desperado's limbs as he covered the ground between the mountain boulder and Bullet Bar.

"Ther sooner I git Bloss inter ther affair ther better," he said as he pursued his way, his mind on the pervading subject. "Ther secret holder is cut—cut ter ther death. He can't hold out long. Mebbe he'll go ter one ov ther heirs—ter ther girl, perhaps. Mebbe he's ther boy playin' Leadville Lou. No, he can't be thet."

Gilded George reached the camp and went straight to the old cabin, the door of which was jerked open before he touched it.

"Did you meet him?—ther thief, ther infernal rascal?" cried Bloss whose stalwart figure appeared in the cramped doorway.

"Who?—What's happened?" exclaimed Gilded George.

"Ther devil what hez euchered us—the galoot who roped in ther papers—ther—"

"Not ther bonanza dockermments? You don't mean ter tell me, Bloss, thet they've been gobbled?"

"Nothin' less than thet," was the reply. "I heard a noise like a man groanin' just beyond ther cabin. I thought Leadville Lou had crept back ter camp an' war dyin' near. I went out, left them precious papers, like a fool, mebbe, lyin' on ther table. I warn't gone more'n five minutes, George. I warn't out o' sight o' ther shanty more'n one, but when I got back thar war nothin' on ther table but ther red string thet tied ther package."

Gilded George let slip an emphatic oath and threw a look toward the rough little table under the lamp. There was nothing on it, as Bloss had said, but a little red string. He stared at this object for a moment, or, until he was called back to his mission by Bloss.

"What did you find?—your man?"

"No. Ther place whar I left him war vacant. Thar warn't even blood on ther grass. That's what brought me back ter you, Bloss."

The eyes of Bloss snapped at Gilded George's words; their brilliancy was observed. From under George's heavy black lashes came a look that was full of accusation.

"Show me ther battle-ground, George," said Bloss. "Thar war never yet a trail lost long ter me."

"Haden't yer better hunt first for ther hound what took ther bonanza papers?"

"We'll find one when we find ther other," was the answer.

"All right. Off we ar', Bloss. If I had my hand at ther throat ov ther galoot what robbed you, an' me, too, I'd show 'im ther death twist."

Bloss went back into the cabin and picked the red tape from the table. For one brief moment his back was turned to his pard, and though not more than five feet separated them, he did not hear the words that fell hissing from Gilded George's lips.

"Lost ther papers while I war away, eh? Warn't out o' ther shanty for a minute and yet lost ther key ter ther big bonanza! Take keer, Bloss ov Bullet Bar. I can't see through a stun wall, but, by heavens! I'm no fool, neither am I blind! Fool with yer old pard, Gilded George, on a matter ov this kind, an' kick a box ov dynamite!"

Bloss came back and, eyed keenly by Gilded George, asked to be shown the scene of the mountain struggle.

"I'll find a trail if I hev ter make it!" said Bloss. "Remember, George, thet ther hull Cleburne bonanza lies at ther end ov this hunt."

There was no reply; Gilded George seemed absorbed in the desire to show his bronze pard the spot in the mountain, and off they went together.

"It war hyer," said George, pointing a few minutes later at a spot where the ground showed unmistakable evidences of a severe struggle between two men at no remote date. "Now, go ter work, Bloss."

Bloss of Bullet Bar began the examination aided by the moonlight, and now and then by a match which he kept shaded by one of his hands. He examined every inch of ground, not a spear of grass seemed to escape his hungry eyes.

Gilded George watched him all the time; he more than half-suspected that his pard was playing a double game.

Though he never took his eyes from the man on the ground, he did not see Bloss give a slight start.

"Nothin'—nothin' ter-night, anyway," remarked Bloss, rising to his feet and facing Gilded George.

"Not a drop ov blood, Bloss—nothin' at all?"

"Not a blade o' grass reddened!"

"Curse it! he didn't fly!" grated Gilded George. "Leadville Lou had no wings."

"Thar's ther lay-out," answered Bloss, pointing toward the ground he had gone over. "Try it."

"I did afore I fetched you hyer. I acknowledge that I hev'n't yer eyes, Bloss."

"Back ter Bullet Bar!"

Bloss turned away as if he had given the hunt

up for that night, and once more the two big pards of the silver camp went back together.

They did not see the man who went after them, the agile man with very dark, snapping eyes and a springy gait.

He saw the two pards reach the camp and separate there. Shaded by a cabin, he watched Gilded George come back toward him, and all at once he faced that worthy and covered him with a six-shooter as his left hand touched his arm.

"I want you!" he said in stern tones. "They call you Gilded George, I believe. You met and fought a man awhile ago. You took his papers. Whar ar' they?"

Gilded George laughed.

"Ye'r on ther wrong trail, pard!" he cried.

The only answer seemed to be the creeping of the leveled revolver closer to Gilded George's head.

The eyes of the man who faced him said plainly: "You lie to me at your peril!"

"On the wrong trail, eh?" he said. "This is about what I expected to hear, but it doesn't answer my question. Whar ar' Centipede Sam's documents?"

"Whose?"

"The Death Spider's papers! Come, George of Bullet Bar. Give me the truth, or I take your head!"

"Jehul! you wouldn't take thet," pard?" cried the desperado.

"Lie an' see! Quick! the truth. I stay with you till I find the papers! Now, for the last time, whar ar' they?"

"Hang it all, you'll hev ter look in Bloss's bosom for 'em. Thet's my opinion, pard. Who ar' you?"

"The genuine Don Frisco, Cut-purse King of Colorado!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A GIRL'S STRANGE OATH.

BULLET BAR, during these proceedings, was not asleep.

In one of the larger cabins nearly all its inhabitants were enjoying themselves around several rough tables, and the loud voices of men and the occasional jingle of coin were the only sounds heard.

Gilded George had been caught in the vicinity of this particular cabin, and his first impulse was to announce with a yell the presence of the outlaw who was known by report even in that mountain den. But bold as was the man of Bullet Bar, he hesitated when he looked into the revolver's muzzle, or over the gleaming barrel into Don Frisco's eyes.

"So," said the brigand, after Gilded George's last answer, "so, I'll have to go to Bloss for ther documents?"

"Thet's what I said," snarled George.

"Whar'll I find him now?"

"Somewhar in camp."

"Come; be definite. No foolin' with me, George. My hand plays wickedly with ther trigger when I'm r'iled."

Gilded George cooled down instantly. He knew that he was dealing with the coolest man west of the Mississippi.

"We'll see what we kin do for yer," he said. "Go ter Bloss's shanty; look for 'im thar first."

"We will. You'll show me ther cabin, George. Off we ar'. Which way do we go, eh?"

This was something which the big man of the silver camp had not bargained for.

What! conduct Don Frisco to his old pard, and stand before Bloss not only an accuser, but a traitor?

Gilded George almost recoiled at the thought, but as there was no help for it, he sullenly started off under the influence of the menacing six-shooter.

Believing that he dared not play with the cut-purse king, he led him direct to the vicinity of Bloss's cabin and pointed to the structure standing in the starlight. Don Frisco advanced to the door and struck it thrice with his knuckles.

Not a sound came from the interior in response to the summons and Don Frisco turned to his companion with a faint smile.

"Not at home, George," he said. "Whar does Bloss loaf?"

"Nowhar—everywhar," was the reply. "Ef he ain't in thar I'm at sea. I don't know whar ter look for him."

The tracker from the East looked disappointed for a moment.

"Very well," he said at last. "I'll see this pard ov yours later. You'll tell him that I'm after him, eh, Gilded George?"

"Not ef you'll make it interestin', cap'n."

"In what way?"

"In givin' me a share ov ther bonanza—ther one those dockermets talk about."

"By Heavens! I'll do that," cried Don Frisco.

"I need a good pard hyer, an' at this stage ov ther game. You'll play with me an' ag'in' Bloss even for a share!"

"Bet yer life, cap'n!"

Don Frisco held out his hand which Gilded George hastened to close upon, and the eyes of the two desperadoes met.

"What ov ther man I robbed?" asked George.

"You seem ter know that I got them dockermets ter-night. Did I finish him?"

"No; you have to cut twice an' almighty deep ter kill Centipede Sam. I saw him staggering over a trail, his shirt torn open an' his papers gone. I made for him with the intention ov puttin' him out o' ther way, but when I reached him I could not. That man-devil an' Don Frisco were pards once. I couldn't kill him, dying as I believed him ter be. He told me who got ther documents, an' I let him go!"

"He will die?"

"He will die."

"But, cap'n," said Gilded George, clutching the outlaw's arm, "why didn't you foller him? He war goin' ter ther girl, er ter ther boy—Gin'ral Cleburne's heirs. Who knows?"

"Ha! I never thought of that. I broke from him the moment he told me who took the papers," exclaimed Don Frisco, almost breaking from the grasp of the rough of Bullet Bar. "He warn't goin' ter ther boy—ter Victor Cleburne; he is dead—killed in a stage 'twixt Denver and Leadville. When he died ther key ter ther bonanza fell inter Centipede Sam's hands. Centipede might hev been goin' ter Lucy. Why didn't thet idea enter my head?"

Don Frisco seemed to hate himself.

"I know whar I lost him," he suddenly cried.

"He war makin' a trail o' blood. I'll find him yet. Let me find Lucy Cleburne, an' I'll hold ther key ter ther biggest bonanza out o' doors. We'll hold it, Gilded George!"

Five minutes afterward Don Frisco was leading the Bullet Bar rough up a winding trail.

Bloss and his prize were forgotten now; the sole thought was the finding of Centipede Sam.

If the Colorado Cut-purse and his companion could have looked far ahead they might have seen the stalwart human being who was pushing deep among the recesses of the mountains that frowned above the outlaws' camp. His eyes had an eager, almost unnatural glare.

"They got ther dockermets, but they've lost ther girl!" he grated in tones that gave him a secret satisfaction. "What do ther will say?"

"Ef at ther end ov fifteen years from date ov this instrument ov writin' neither my son or daughter ar' found ter be livin', then my whole estate, my mines, my money—all my wealth—ter go ter ther State ov Californy. I've got them words burned inter my brain somehow. Ther fifteen years expire ther twenty-fifth day ov October. This is September—mighty nigh ther end ov ther time. I see! ther bonanza can't be got without ther girl who is called Leadville Lucy. Ther boy'll never turn up. Wal, I should say not. Gilded George an' pard hev ther dockermets an' I've got—what? A bowie stab, an' Lucy! By heavens! I'll make ther 'lone hand' beat 'em yet! It'll beat 'em all even if ther State ov Californy rakes in ther golden stake. I've got ther key in my grip. Without Leadville Lucy ther play fails. Oh, Centipede Sam still holds ther devil's own hand!"

This was the man moving over the trail; this was the outlaw whose name and deeds had been linked to the history of more than one State carved out of the great wild West. This was the real Centipede Sam who with death stamped on his face was playing out his last lone hand among the mountains on the California border.

He had tightened the leathern belt usually about his waist around his chest and pressing against the wound received at Gilded George's hand it had stopped the flow of blood so that he left no telltale trail of crimson as he went step by step over the mountain way.

"All right! bask in yer sins, Bullet Bar!" he cried as he turned suddenly and shook his fist toward the silver town which was visible no longer. "Ef I get over this wingin', I'll come back hyer an' git up a picnic thet'll paint yer history red. I've been knifed afore! My car-kiss looks like a map ov China, but I'm still ther player ov ther best lone hands this kentry ever heard on. Ho, ho! Bloss an' Gilded George. You've got ther dockermets but I hold ther girl. Now, who's ahead?"

He laughed to think of his success despite the terrible turn affairs had taken, and more than once, as he moved on, the smile came back to his darkened face.

All at once a long distance from the scene of his struggle with Gilded George, he darted from the trail, and disappeared among dense shadows and huge rocks.

"I'll lay ther hull thing afore her," he said. "She knows pretty much ov it now, but I'll give 'er ther hull lay-out."

A minute later he stooped and crept between two boulders and under a third. He found himself in a corridor not narrow, nor high, and pursuing this some distance he entered a place in which he could stand erect.

Then he found, despite the gloom, a coil of rope which when unwound was a black lasso, and striking a match he made his way to a stone about which he made the lasso fast.

"Now down inter ther bird nest," he said, and swinging his body over the rock which seemed a great wall with here and there a projecting spur, he went hand over hand down the rope until his feet touched solid ground.

"I'm back, Lucy," said Centipede Sam, catching sight of the young prisoner who stood in the

light of a small fire built on the ground. "I come back a winged bird, but not with my claws gone! Look hyer, girl. This belt holds back ther blood ov ther best player ov lone hands thet ever crimsoned ther grass ov Texas. Yer know thet I went off with ther dockermets."

"With Victor's papers?—I know that," was the answer.

"Wal, I hev'n't got 'em now. I've lost 'em."

Leadville Lucy uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Lost 'em at ther p'int ov a bowie," the desperado went on. "They've got inter ther hands ov two roughs ov Bullet Bar—ther hyena camp below us."

"Who are they?—tell me!" cried the girl, her eyes flashing while her hand clutched Centipede's arm.

"What'll you do?"

"I'll get them!"

"Ther dockermets?"

"Yes."

"You pit yerself ag'in' Bloss an' his pard, Gilded George?"

"I will get the papers!" answered the girl, with firmness. "You dare not trust me, Centipede Sam. I know the way to Bullet Bar. I've seen the place though from a distance, you know. You dare not trust me to go thither to fight for my identity—to rescue the documents which will make me somebody in the world—that will give me a name!"

"But you wouldn't come back!" cried the Texan.

"You have not tried me," the girl said.

"You think I would desert you at the first chance. Why shouldn't I? Don't you know that I have sworn to avenge Victor? The oath I took over his dead body is not forgotten. Send me to Bullet Bar for the papers if you dare!"

"But you won't come back, Lucy," persisted Sam.

"I will!" exclaimed the girl. "I will throw the important papers at your feet."

"You darsn't swear ter thet, girl?"

"I dare. I swear Centipede Sam to bring the documents back to you! I will invade Bullet Bar and find them. They make me somebody. I know that Victor was bringing them to me when he died. Now, with my oath, you refuse to give me a trial."

"Hang this Texas hawk ef he doesn't!" cried the Death Spider. "To Bullet Bar yer go, Lucy. Bloss an' Gilded George hev ther dockermets—don't forget ther names."

"I will not. Show me the way out o' this cavern. I'm eager to go."

Not long afterward Leadville Lucy stood under the brilliant stars and felt the breeze on her cheeks. She had taken a strange, wild oath, and with it to urge her on, she started eagerly down the mountain toward Bullet Bar.

The trail was new to the Queen of Leadville, but it was not difficult to follow, as it was certain to lead the traveler to the silver camp.

The girl was not unarmed; the last act of Centipede Sam ere he sent her away being to thrust a revolver into her hand, and clutching this she hurried on eager to begin the battle for the documents of so much value to her.

On, on went the young girl until she found herself among the thirty cabins of Bullet Bar.

Here and there gleamed a light, and from one cabin came the sounds of rough voices, and the laugh of the camp revelers.

"I'll find my men where the crowd is," murmured the girl. "Bloss and Gilded George—their names suit them well, I'll warrant. Heaven nerve me for the struggle for my identity and inheritance. If I fail—if I lose at last—it will be in a righteous cause!"

The laughter directed her toward a certain cabin, from whose little window at the right of the door came a flood of light. The door itself was slightly ajar.

Leadville Lucy was soon at the threshold and her eyes took in the three tables and their occupants. Not a face that she did not scan.

All at once one of the men started toward the door.

"Good-by, Bloss!" cried a gambler to him.

"Come around afore day ef yer get in ther risk-in' humor. No big stakes in Bullet Bar ter-night."

The man came out.

Bloss! Leadville Lucy felt a thrill sweep through her heart. He was one of the pards who had robbed Centipede Sam!

The next moment the girl was gliding on Bloss's heels.

CHAPTER XXX.

FOOLING WITH FATE.

To follow Bloss until he was some distance from the roughs of Bullet Bar and then strike him for the stolen documents was the young girl's plan.

Where his partner Gilded George was she did not know—probably back in the cabin where the gamblers were playing for and swearing over very moderate stakes.

Bloss promised to lead the girl a long chase. He seemed eager to leave the camp, as if something of importance drew him away.

"He shall not escape me," said Lucy, resolutely, while she watched the big rough, and wondered how she was to get at the business which had brought her to Bullet Bar. "If you have not the papers, Bloss, I will turn to Gilded George. I am fighting for my identity now, and I have sworn to win!"

Bloss turned suddenly on his heel, as if he had forgotten something, and went toward a certain cabin, the door of which he flung open and entered.

"Why not face him in there?" exclaimed Leadville Lucy. The shanty may prove a cage for the tiger. I will try it."

A bound landed her at the door, and she heard the snap of a match and saw a flash of flame.

Bloss, with his back turned upon the girl, was lighting a lamp, and Lucy, standing on the threshold, watched him with the revolver clutched in her hand.

"George looked at me pretty hard when I told 'im that somebody skipped with ther dockements while he war away," laughed Bloss, in audible tones. "Ther story didn't seem ter go down with ther ease ov an oyster. Ha, ha! George. B'lieve it or not jest as yer please; I'm boss ov this shebang. Bloss is ther head tiger ov this jungle."

Indeed, he looked like one, tall, big and bronzed, as he turned toward the door to see for the first time the face of the Queen of Leadville.

"Heavens! what seraph 's that?" fell from his lips, as he hesitated whether to go forward or recoil.

"No seraph, but Leadville Lucy," said the girl, firmly. "Stand where you are, Bloss of Bullet Bar!"

"By Jove! she knows me!"

"By name only," was the answer. "I think we have never met before."

As if charmed by her voice and figure, and fully recovered from his surprise, Bloss leaned forward and gazed into the girl's face.

"Whar's yer camp? What crowd ar' ye queen ov?" he asked.

"I have no camp. I am queen of no 'crowd,'" cried Lucy, her bright eyes flashing. "I am here to see you."

"Me?" laughed Bloss. "By heavens! this ar' a compliment, my mountain pink. Hyer ter see Bloss ov ther Bar?"

"To see you!"

"Wal, hyer I am ez large ez life, but not much ov a chromo arter all. I wouldn't look stunnin' in a frame an' notain' ov ther kind, but I'm a dandy in some places—a hollyhock in full bloom, an' so forth. Wanter see this rosebud, my fragrant bouquet? Wal, sail in!" And the big rough of Bullet Bar folded his arms and leaned against the table ready for the girl to proceed.

The coolness of the man nonplused Leadville Lucy for a moment. He could not suspect that he had sought him out on thrilling business that had brought her to the silver camp. It could not be.

"You invite me; I begin," said Leadville Lucy, taking a step forward. "I am here for certain documents that were taken since sundown from a man known to this camp as Leadville Lou. Those papers were taken from him by your pard—they have been seen by you. You know where they are! I want them!"

The almost colorless lips of the girl met firmly behind the last sentence, and told Bloss that she had resolved to recover the papers even at the hazard of life.

"Is that all?" he asked coolly.

"Yes. I want only the documents," answered Lucy.

"What if I hev'n't 'em?"

"That shall not put me off," was the reply. "Bloss of Bullet Bar, I have spent my life among men as rough as I know you to be. They may have tintured my soul with parts of their natures; at any rate, they have endowed me with the resolve to recover the documents I want. Do not say to me that you have not the stolen documents. I am not here to listen to denials. You and Gilded George act as one man. You are pards. Now, sir, where are the papers?"

"That's a p'inted question," chuckled Bloss. "You come to a bad place for stolen papers. I'm no thief, neither am I a bank for stolen property."

"You refuse to tell me where they are? You say you do not know where they are?"

Bloss did not speak.

A sudden thought rushing lightning-like across his brain, had almost staggered him.

Who was the girl before him but the child mentioned in several of the documents? If she was not the lost Cleburne heiress, why should she seek the papers at that moment lying close to his heart?

"Play it well, Bloss," he said to himself. "Ther bonanza is within your grip. Hold a steady hand an' throw ther right kerd at ther right time."

Then he said to the girl:

"Let me see; you want dockiments, eh? Come all ther way from—from—ah—"

"No difference where I came from!" was the interruption. "You shall not prevaricate, Bloss of Bullet Bar. I have sought you to act, not to

parley. Those papers cut from Leadville Lou with a bowie, are within your reach. You shall surrender them before I leave your cabin, or I will take them after a manner that may not be agreeable to you."

"Which means what, my gold-land pink?"

"Need I tell you, when I hold this in my hand?"

And the revolver, lifted suddenly, covered Gilded George's pard, and he looked over the polished barrel into the stern face of the mountain queen.

"Ho! you wouldn't shoot Bloss, girl?" laughed the ruffian. "Why, 'twould be startin' a graveyard at Bullet Bar."

"The documents, or the graveyard?" said Leadville Lucy. "Come, Bloss!"

"Thar ar' two ov us; you forget that."

"No; but I deal with one at a time—with you first, my dear Bloss. The papers—with not one missing. Quick!"

The desperate silver sport bit one lip under his drooping mustache. The cool demeanor of the girl had astonished him. She had come to Bullet Bar to act, not to parley.

"Ther papers ain't hyer," he said. "What I hev'n't got I can't give up."

"Open your jacket and next to your shirt-front," was the inexorable answer. "I tell you plainly that I came here prepared to take no citizen of this camp at his word."

"Jerusalem! Ef ye war a man an' told me that, I'd show yer ther claws ov a silver tiger!" roared the rough.

"You can show the claws of the tiger now, if you desire. I give you two minutes in which to produce the papers. You have them; your eyes have told me so twenty times, Bloss of Bullet Bar. I shall count six for you, and in order to waste no time, I commence now. One—two—"

The upward movement of the ruffian's hand stopped the girl at the second syllable.

"One word!" he said. "Ye're playin' fool ter-night, girl. This isn't Leadville nor Denver, but Bullet Bar, a camp whar we all ar' bound by an oath taken over bowies dipped in ther mingled blood ov all. You wouldn't live ter git out o' camp ov yer dropped me for ther sake ov a few papers which may possess a sartain value ter you."

"I know it all. I have weighed the risk with the desire," said the girl. "I counted the cost coming down the mountain. Don't interrupt me again, Bloss. I begin again: One—two—"

"Go on!" hissed the tough. "What I hev'n't got I can't give up."

"Open your jacket and show me the flesh behind it!"

"Ter Hades with yer!"

The hands of Bloss suddenly tore wide his jacket, and then as his teeth cracked, he laid his fingers on his dark shirt. But there he stopped.

"Proceed!" commanded Leadville Lucy.

"Never! why, girl, you value life too high to shoot Bloss in Bowie Bar. Ther crack ov yer revolver 'd settle yer hash, seraph though ye be! Oh, zounds! Let's close this farce!"

"Very well! You close it—not I, Bloss!"

The name was followed by the crack of a revolver that flashed in the ruffian's face, and back from the smoke reeled the stalwart tough who had tried the cool Queen of Leadville too far!

The explosion seemed to startle the young girl and she stood for a moment dazed at the spectacle before her—the mountain Hercules lying on the rough floor of the cabin in the rays of the tin lamp on its nail against the wall.

"Nothing shall keep me from my own!" she suddenly exclaimed. "I have sworn to recover the key to my own identity, and I will!"

She stooped and looked into the face of the man on the floor.

"He would not, and he died," she muttered.

A moment later her hand glided toward the desperado's breast, and she was about to search for the document when the cabin door was flung wide and a man sprang inside.

"Hello! what's this?" he exclaimed as Leadville Lucy started up with a strange and gasping cry. "A woman on Bloss's trail? An' you've finished him—killed my old pard? By Heavens! I'll throw yer among ther tigers for this!"

Already the hands of the big dark rough had encircled the young girl's slender arms. He drew her toward the door—all this before she had uttered a word.

"Come with me!" he went on. "Won't I break up ther game at Jerusalem Jake's? They'll think you fell from ther skies, but angels don't kill—not much, my pistol seraph."

"Who are you?"

It was the girl's first sentence.

"Me! Oh, I'm Bloss's right bower. They call me Gilded George."

"The other one!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Ye'r right thar, girl. I'm ther other one! Never saw ther pards o' Bullet Bar, eh? They're a daisy picture gallery when they're all together, an' we'll find ther whole lay-out at Jerusalem's."

There was no remonstrating with a man like that. The girl did not try.

The next moment she was beyond the cabin, and Gilded George carried her swiftly away.

All at once he kicked open the door of a rather large shanty, and bursting into the one room it

contained, held up the girl to the gaze of twenty men.

"Look at 'er!" he cried. "Ain't she a daisy? She's killed Bloss ov Bullet Bar!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

DEEPER IN THE TOLLS.

THE tableau presented in the gambler's cabin of Bullet Bar was a thrilling one.

Held aloft in the grip of Gilded George, Leadville Lucy looked into the swarthy faces of the astonished roughs, and met their gaze with a calmness that still further excited their wonder.

Not one of them had ever seen the girl before; they were not even aware of her existence and they could not imagine from whence she had come.

Gilded George's announcement that she had taken Bloss's life seemed incredible. That young girl killed the best known man of the silver camp, the biggest, coolest and most desperate of them all? Impossible!

The men broke out with expressions of unbelief. Some men laughed at the terrible accusation.

"Drop me in my boots ef it's a wind-game!" cried Gilded George. "I caught 'er bendin' over Bloss who lies dead in his shanty. Why did she kill 'im? What fetched her ter Bullet Bar? Ask ther killin' daisy!"

The speaker lowered his beautiful captive while the tough fellows crowded about with more than one eager question.

"Catechise her; thar she is," he went on drawing back toward the door. "You'll excuse me for a moment, pards."

"Whar ar' ye goin', George?" asked several men.

"Back ter ther she hyena's victim."

"Keep that man here!" cried Leadville Lucy covering Gilded George with her finger. "I answer no questions except in his presence."

She knew what was taking Bloss's pard back to the man lying on the floor of the little shanty; she remembered that the important documents bearing on her identity were concealed on his body, and that Gilded George doubtless knew it. Once in his hands, they would be lost forever!

"You hear what ther girl says, Gilded," said one of the pards. "She won't shoot her mouth off with you away. We'll all go down ter Bloss's tergether."

Gilded George darted a mad look at Leadville Lucy. She had failed him in some design, and the proposal to go to Bloss's shanty was doubly distasteful to the desperado.

"Curse her! she suspects," he grated under his breath. "Ther documents ar' somewhar on Bloss, an' ther girl knows it. What if they should be diskivered by all Bullet Bar?—what ef she should give ther hull thing away?"

To the proposal made by one of the roughs, the girl interposed no objection. To go back to her victim with the bronze pards was to baffle Gilded George, and that is what she had resolved on doing if it were possible.

"Ef ye'r goin' ter Bloss, come along!" snapped Gilded George, addressing the crowd. "Take the girl along an' make her tell her story in ther presence ov ther whitest man ther ever crossed ther gold range."

A minute afterward the Queen of Leadville found herself walking back toward Bloss's cabin between two big citizens, and still curiously watched by the whole lot.

"I'll stand between her an' them ar' papers," Gilded George said more than once to himself. "Ther game hez got ter ther p'int ther last kerd's win. Ther man called Don Frisco didn't find Centipede Sam's trail. I left 'im in time ter keep ther girl from takin' ther dockements from Bloss's bosom. It war luck."

Three minutes' walk sufficed to bring the hard crowd and its beautiful prisoner to the cabin, the door of which Gilded George kicked open, and then whirled upon those behind him.

"Ther whitest pard ov Bullet Bar, gents," he said, pointing into the cabin. "Thar's ther dead, and thar ther killer!"

A faint smile, full of defiance, appeared at the corners of Lucy's finely-chiseled lips, a bright light in the depths of her eyes. She saw through Gilded George's motive; he was trying to manufacture sentiment against her.

Several of the men would have sprung into the cabin if Gilded George had not anticipated their design and preceded them with a bound.

"Nobody teches ther body without my say-so. Bloss an' I war pards!" he cried.

The big ruffian planted himself like a pillar of iron between the men of Bullet Bar, and the body lying at his feet, and faced them with a tigerish resolution under his drooping lashes.

"Now, question ther girl," he went on. "She stands whar she shot ther truest pard ther ever wore boots. What fetched her hyer—what leveled her dropper? Ten ter one ther she refuses ter spit out ther truth."

Leadville Lucy, who had glanced at the figure lying in the lamplight, said nothing, but drew her form up like a queen, and looked at the captain of the roughs.

"Thar he is, miss," this individual said, looking at Bloss. "You did it, eh?"

"Gilded George says so."

"Heavens! I found 'er hyer. She still held

ther pistol, an' Bloss war warm!" exclaimed the dead man's pard. "She intimates that we can't prove ther crime, eh? I'm ther proof, pards—ther livin' witness, that she took ther life ov Bloss ov Bullet Bar. What say yer ter me, girl?"

He leaned forward and fixed his piercing eyes on the young girl's face.

"D'yer say yer didn't do it? Isn't that yer work? Didn't I find yer kneelin' over Bloss when I came? Eh?"

"Yes!" was the answer, in most startling tones. "Yes, I killed that man, men of Bullet Bar. I gave him a chance for his life—a chance of which Gilded George knows nothing. I fight for something dearer to me than life itself. My battle is for honor!"

"Such battles ar' generally lost in this kentry!" suddenly roared Gilded George in a laugh that caused a deep flush to suffuse the girl's face. "Honor, eh? By Jerusalem! my mountain pink, ye'll rekiver nothin' in ther contest ef thet's ther prize!"

"If I lose, sir, then you lose also. I have sworn that!" was the quick reply. "Yes, men of Bullet Bar, that man is my victim. I deny it not. He tempted me too far. I gave him time and a chance. He laughed; he thought my hand would not slay."

A strange silence followed Leadville Lucy's words. The pards looked at one another, and then glanced at Gilded George, firmly planted before the dead.

"But thet's not all," said Jerusalem Jake. "You hev'n't said *why* yer killed Bloss. Let us have thet."

"Is this a court?" asked the girl quietly.

"It's an investigation," was the reply. "Thar's no law in Bullet Bar but thet ov night. Yer came hyer ter shoot Bloss?"

"I came here to shed no blood. He would not, and I shot him!"

"Would not *what*?"

"He refused to give me the key to my identity—my honor," said the girl, resolutely, looking at Gilded George, as if to note the effect of her words on that worthy.

"I don't quite take all thet in," remarked Jerusalem Jake.

"I will make it plain. Beneath the dead man's shirt-bosom are some documents which belong to me," she said. "They concern me greatly; they tell me who I am; they reveal a secret which has been lost for years."

"An' yer dropped Bloss because he held the papers an' wouldn't give 'em up?"

"Yes, I'm fighting for my name, as I told you."

"Oh, fudge!" cried Gilded George. "Don't I know thet ther girl's playin' a game that does credit to her shrewdness? What Bloss knew I knew. We had no secrets from each other. Dockermments in his bosom thet concerns thet girl who never saw Bloss ner Bullet Bar till ter-night. The whole game's a sham!"

"It kin soon be seen!" said a voice behind the girl. "Open Bloss's shirt."

"Not ter-night," said Gilded George, his fingers tightening about the butt of his revolver. "You kin b'lieve ther shootin' tigrass from No-whar, but yer can't b'lieve Gilded George. By Heavens! I feel ther insult keenly. No man touches Bloss without my consent. Leave me alone with my pard. Let me plant him. Set ther girl free—I see yer won't punish her. Ye're right, Jerusalem Jake. Thar's no law in Bullet Bar."

"You see, gentlemen," said Lucy, looking at the crowd. "He throws my words back to me. He says there are no papers in Bloss's bosom; I say there are. I stake my life on it. If there are none, then take me out yonder and make me food for your revolvers."

"Thet's fair! Give the girl a chance!" said several voices at once.

"Her word ag'in' mine," said Gilded George, coolly. "I say thar's no dockermments on Bloss's body. He war my pard; nobody touches him till I give ther orders."

Slowly from the rear of the crowd two revolvers crept up at the same time, and Gilded George saw all at once that he was "covered," and that before he could lift his own six-shooters.

"We demand an investigation," said one of the pards who held the two weapons. "Ther girl says one thing, you another, Gilded George. We demand thet a search be made for them ar' dockermments. We ar' all pards; we want no blood, but you must give ther girl a chance! Stand aside, George, an' let Jerusalem look!"

Gilded George gave the speaker a flashing look of anger, and saw that the whole crowd sustained him.

"Hang me! ef I don't leave ther camp!" he cried. "When ther word ov Gilded George doesn't stand ag'in' a girl's it's time fer him ter hunt another ranch. Thar's ther corpse, gents. Now, Jerusalem, go ter work."

A stride carried the lank figure of Jerusalem Jake to the body of the silver pard and all saw him stoop over it.

Leadville Lucy was not among the least interested spectators.

In a moment the bony fingers of Jake had opened the shirt-front of the dead man and his hand quickly disappeared. The girl leaned forward in her eagerness; her eyes seemed ready to start from her head.

"Ther bank ar' empty!" suddenly said Jerusalem Jake casting a glance up at the expectant crowd.

"Empty!" rung the echo from the girl's lips.

"Empty ez last year's buzzard nest!" was the answer as Jerusalem Jake straightened.

"Thar's nothin' in thar but cold flesh."

"What did I say?" exclaimed Gilded George who could not conceal the astonishment caused by the search. "You wouldn't b'lieve me; oh no! Gentlemen, the girl shot Bloss fer no papers. She killed the whitest pard in Bullet Bar—dropped him in cold blood. No papers on him—nothin'! Who's lied, pards ov ther Rockies—thet female assassin or Gilded George?"

Leadville Lucy was too astonished to speak. She would have staked her life on the assertion that the hunted documents were on Bloss's person when he staggered back from the flash of her revolver.

"They were not there now!"

"Come! what say yer now, girl?" said Jerusalem Jake suddenly clutching Lucy's arm, and calling her back to life, as it were.

"My God! I know not what to say!" was the answer. "Bloss gave me proof enough before I fired that the papers—the secret of my identity—were in his bosom. They are not there now, you say."

"Nary a paper!"

"I should say not!" hissed a voice just outside the door of the shanty. "A post mortem wouldn't reveal the key to the big bonanza. I'm playin' a lone hand that threatens to discount Centipede Sam's best. Ha, ha; ha!" and the man who spoke glided away toward the confines of the silver camp.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DENVER SPORT STEPS IN.

THE man who walked from the vicinity of Bloss's cabin was neither followed nor molested, and it is not our intention to keep track of him at present.

Leadville Lucy could not recover from the surprise occasioned by the failure of Jerusalem Jake to find any documents in the dead man's bosom. She could not account for their absence.

True, she had not seen them there, but the actions of Bloss when faced by her a short time before, his refusal to be searched, coupled with Centipede Sam's story of the robbery, and the fact that Gilded George and Bloss were pards—all these things had convinced the girl that the papers proclaiming her identity were secreted under the dark shirt of the desperado.

Who had appeared at the cabin since the shooting and robbed the dead?

Certain she was that Gilded George had not, and she saw that the disappearance of the papers mystified that individual very much.

"He had the documents when my pistol spoke his doom. I am sure he had," she said to herself. "Somebody has been here and robbed him. These men will not let me discover whom."

"Thar's Bloss—bury him!" suddenly cried Gilded George, addressing the men of Bullet Bar. "Do what yer please with ther girl what killed 'im. Make 'er queen ov Bullet, ef yer wish. I'm anxious ter git away from this infernal place."

He advanced toward the cabin door and nobody seemed inclined to oppose him. A quick, mad look darted from his eyes at Lucy and with clinched hands he bounded across the threshold and landed in the light of the stars whose dial pointed toward morning.

"Somebody came in twixt ther time I took ther girl away from Bloss's an' her comin' back with Jerusalem Jake an' ther crowd," he said to himself. "It warn't Leadville Lucy, for I cut 'im too deep fer ter come back. No, it warn't thet chap. Now then, who war it? Thar's only one other man hereabouts interested in them papers—only one—an' he calls himself Don Frisco. By heavens!" and Gilded George shut his hands tightly again, "by heavens! ther chief is Don Frisco!"

Having reached this conclusion which seemed the natural one under the circumstances, Gilded George threw a look over his shoulders and into the cabin by the half-open door and started off at a rapid gait.

He did not know where to find Don Frisco, but he knew where he had deserted him a short time before, still hunting for the trail of wounded Centipede Sam, his traitor with the "lone hand."

Shortly after Gilded George's departure, there came into camp two men who walked side by side. One was clad in buckskin and his face was dark and his hair long, black and straight like an Indian's; the other was well built, young, and strikingly handsome.

"Hush! what kind ov a procession do you call that, brother?" suddenly asked the Indianified person touching the arm of his companion.

The two had stopped at the corner of a cabin, and saw the men who emerged from another near by.

"Something's happened, Pawnee," the whiter man said, still watching the crowd curiously. "Look! by my life! there's a woman among them. A woman in Bullet Bar!"

"Lucy, mebbe, Duke."

"I more than half believe it," was the reply

couched in the lowest of whispers. "What if we should find Lucy here an' Calumet Tom run across Centipede Sam in the mountains? The girl it is! I'd know her among a thousand. There's only one Leadville Lucy."

Denver Duke—for he the speaker was—seemed ready to rush forward, but the hand of his companion, the Indian in buckskin, had suddenly encircled his wrist, thus keeping him back.

Silent and almost breathless, the two men watched the pards of Bullet Bar as they moved away from the cabin just left, shaping their course toward the shanty where they had been surprised at their usual game.

"That girl is in the toils," said Denver Duke. "She has fallen into a trap of some kind. The man who raises his hand against her will wish he had never been born!"

"Follow."

The two pards left their station and crept after the crowd; they saw Leadville Lucy conducted to a small cabin and lodged inside while Jerusalem Jake and pards grouped themselves in front of it.

"Gents," said Jake, "you know ther blood law of this region. Ther girl says she shot Bloss for refusin' ter give up certain dockermments thet bear on her name. But when we s'arch Bloss no papers ar' found—not a smidgin' ov writin'. Gilded George said all along we'd find none an' he war right. Now we come ter this pint. War it murder? Thar's ther girl, 'nod-din' toward the cabin,' an' over yonder's Bloss dead in his bull-hide boots. Gents, we never hold court in this camp. Hyertofore it's been no use, but we never hed a case like this. An' ther girl's so pretty, too—a reg'lar l'ocky rose, but a p'isen one as Bloss knows afore this."

The big bronze men heard Jerusalem Jake through without one interruption; they looked at the cabin when he did and hung almost breathlessly on his words.

"It's with you, men," continued Jake, "ye'r ther court—judge an' jury. Ther prisoner makes no denial ov it—she says she shot Bloss, an' tells yer why. Them dockermments may hev been much ter her, but we can't tell. If Bloss had given 'em up when she asked for 'em, mebbe he'd be trampin' earth jist now. He wouldn't ther girl said, an' he died. It's all with you, men," and Jerusalem Jake waved his hand in the faces of the crowd. "You constitute ther first court ov Bullet Bar an' yer prisoner is young, a creature thet seems ter be fightin' for her rights."

Jerusalem Jake stepped back in a manner which told that he had finished, and had left Leadville Lucy's case in the hands of his pards. He had showed his sympathies plainly; they were with the girl.

The men came closer together and began to whisper in earnest tones. They were watched by Denver Duke and Pawnee who stood near with their hands on their revolvers, and with eyes and ears on the alert.

"Let's put it off till mornin'!" suddenly cried one. "What's ther use ov bein' hasty?"

"Try 'er now an' hyer!" said Jerusalem. "She's guilty now if at any time. Ef it's justifiable homicide ter-morrow, it's thet now."

The pards of Bullet Bar put their heads together once more. It was a strange court, a weird scene under the morning stars. Jerusalem Jake stood erect with his large arms crossed on his chest, and the most interested spectator of all.

All at once a deep voice said among the group of silent sports:

"All yer in favor ov ther verdict bein' murder hold up yer hands."

Eleven hands went up not all at once but in twos and threes, and singly, until this number had been raised.

"Heavens!" ejaculated Denver Duke moving forward a step. "They will condemn her! But by the eternal heaven! they shall never execute!" Jerusalem Jake had also started forward at the vote; his eyes were full of mingled fear and indignation.

"Now, all in favor ov callin' it justifiable homicide hold up yer right hands," said the same deep voice which had put the first proposition.

A number of hands were lifted again.

"Eleven!" said a voice.

"A tie!" said another.

"I claim ter hev a castin' vote in a matter ov this kind!" suddenly said Jerusalem Jake, throwing his burly figure forward and almost into the middle of the crowd. "A tie, eh? Eleven ter eleven!—half fer murder an' half fer justifiable homicide. You all voted yer sentiments, I reckon."

Twenty-two tongues answered "yes," and Jake lifted his hand.

"Then I vote mine. I decide ther trial. I vote with ther last eleven. By Jerusalem! I b'lieve thet ther girl had a right ter kill Bloss!"

A dead silence followed the last sentence in which the two factions looked at one another.

"I thought we war ther court," growled one man, eying Jerusalem Jake through overarchin' brows.

"But I'm judge!" was the reply. "It takes more than eleven men ter hang a woman at Bullet Bar. I'll inform ther prisoner ov ther result ov ther trial—"

"We'll do that!" said a voice, so startling and stern that the crowd wheeled at sound of it. "Halt! not another step toward that shanty!" cried Jerusalem Jake, whose hand had drawn a revolver in the dropping of an eyelash.

"For you—not much!" was the answer. "Pards of Bullet Bar, we want the blood of no man among you—not even that of those who voted for death. We want the person of the girl in that cabin—no more, nothing less. Cover the crowd, Pawnee, an' at the lifting of a hand open with your death-batteries!"

The Indian in buckskin had already planted himself firmly before the astonished pards of Bullet Bar, and in each of the dark hands he had thrust forward gleamed a cocked revolver.

Denver Duke stepped to the cabin door which was a few yards away and was about to lift the wooden latch when the portal flew open and the fair inmate sprung out.

"Duke!" she exclaimed. "I did not look for you here!"

"Perhaps not, Lucy; but I'm one of those fellows who happen around at intervals," replied the Denver sport, with a smile.

"Gentlemen," he continued, turning to the Bullet Bar pards; "we'll take charge of this young lady. I understand that the case against her has been voted justifiable homicide—"

"By one man's castin' vote!" hissed a voice, deep in the crowd.

"An' that vote war mine," said Jerusalem Jake. "Though I war Bloss's friend, I take that girl's word. When I vote ter hang a woman may ther brazen doors ov Tartarus swing wide fer my soul!"

"Take 'er away an' be durned quick about it!" growled the same deep, dissenting voice, a precursor of future evil.

Denver Duke glanced madly and defiantly at the crowd and led Lucy away.

"Come," he said to her. "We have found you at last. Woe to the men who step between us!"

Pawnee, dark-eyed and cool, still faced the pards with pistols raised, but moving back inch by inch.

At last he turned and joined Denver Duke and the girl.

"Forward!" he whispered. "The panthers who voted against Lucy ar' showin' their teeth."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN THE CAVE.

CENTIPEDE SAM waited for Leadville Lucy in the cavern until his patience was well-nigh exhausted. Time and again he cursed himself for letting the girl depart on the foolhardy mission to Bullet Bar. True, she had sworn to come back to him, even if she recovered the precious documents, and he had trusted her.

Now, he wished he had not let her go, and while he stood in the light of the fire burning on the floor of the cavern, he more than half-believed that the "lone hand" had failed at last.

"Set me down for a fool—a blasted fool!" he grated. "I've trusted a snake—I let the girl get away—opened the trap myself. Centipede Sam, you ought ter pass in yer checks."

"What's that?" said a voice that made the desperado look up to the opening overhead from which dangled the black lasso.

"Hello! who ar' you?" cried the Death Spider, starting forward, his hand clutching a revolver. "Have you hunted me down, Gilded George? By Heavens! ef it's you, jest drop yer carkiss down hyer an' we'll fight it out. Down, ef you dare! Wounded ez I am, thar's vengeance in ther old man yet."

A chuckle and then a laugh was the result.

"Not George, eh? You darsn't name yerself, coward."

"Darsn't, yer say? As ye'r ther man I've been lookin' fer, I'll come down an' interview ye. How's yer rope?"

"'Twould hold two men," said the Texan, wondering who had threatened to visit him. "Ar' yer really comin' down hyer?"

"Bet yer life, Centipede!" And the next moment the figure of a human being swung into view and began to descend.

Centipede Sam's eyes were filled with curiosity and he almost forgot that he was armed while he watched the man on the rope.

"By Jehosaphat! I ought ter know yer," he said, as the visitor struck the ground and wheeled upon him, displaying a dark face and a pair of big, black eyes.

"I should remark, Centipede," was the reply. "Ye hev'n't forgot how I unmasked yer ther night ye fetched Victor's empty valise inter Leadville?"

"Calumet Tom!" ejaculated the Texan.

"I'm thet individual huckleberry an' no one else," said the desperado's visitor. "You might hunt ther world over fer Calumet Tom ov Leadville, an' find 'im nowhar but hyer."

"You trailed me thither," growled the Death Spider, as if the presence of the Leadviller had just told him that he (Centipede Sam) was a hunted man. "Ye'r huntin' me, eh?"

"Kinder so," observed Calumet Tom. "It appears ter me, from my stan'p'int, Centipede, thet I'm not ther only individual who'd like ter find yer jest now. Wal, I should say not. Ye left Leadville very sudden, takin' with yer Lucy an' leavin' Keno Kate behind in a bad fix."

"How is the woman?" suddenly cried Centipede Sam. "Didn't I choke ther tigress ter death?"

"Not quite, but I almos' wish yer had," said Tom. "What kind o' fingers hev you, anyhow? Jehu! they got in behind Keno Kate's breathin' apparatus an' choked her crazy. Do they allus do thet, Centipede?"

"Crazy, eh?"

"Mad as a March hare! You didn't sarve Lucy ther same way, eh? No! thet girl's too valuable fer thet."

"What'd yer insinuate?" cried Centipede Sam. "Nothin' ov consequence," grinned the man from Leadville, "only I'd like ter know whar ther girl is myself."

"You don't see her hyer, Calumet Tom?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

"But you know."

Centipede Sam said nothing for a moment. He looked into the Leadville trailer's face and tried to read what was passing in his mind.

"Ar' yer alone?" he suddenly asked.

"Look around. D'yer see any pards?"

"We ar' alone hyer, I see thet; but I mean—you did not come hyer alone?"

"Wal, no."

"The Injun you call Pawnee in Leadville is with you?"

"An' Denver Duke."

"Ther man I tumbled in ther Grand Colorado thet night, but failed to kill."

"Ther same chap."

"They both look fer Lucy an' fer Centipede Sam?"

"Yes."

"Wal, you've found Sam, Calumet; you've tracked down ther Death Spider ov Texas."

"It seems so."

"But you've not found ther girl."

"But I will!"

The lips of the miner rough closed firmly behind the last word, and his right foot seemed to glide toward the Texan.

The two men were not standing more than ten feet apart, and in the light of the fire that blazed on the stone floor of the cavern a few feet away.

Centipede Sam still wore about his chest the belt he had taken from his waist for the purpose of keeping in place the bandage he had applied to his wound. His face was paler than usual; loss of blood had rendered it pallid, though his eyes burned with their wonted luster.

"Don't yer think, Calumet, thet findin' Centipede Sam might disarrange yer plans?" he suddenly asked, insinuatingly. "In other words, ar' yer sartain thet trackin' me down ter-night war for ther best? What ef I should cut this rope, an' toss ther shortest end up through ther hole?"

A sudden stride carried the Death Spider to the lasso that dangled from the opening overhead, and before Calumet Tom could divine his intention he held the blade of a bowie against it.

"Don't yer know, Tom, thet a desperate man 'll do some desperate things?" he went on.

"Don't I owe yer one fer callin' me Centipede Sam thet night in Leadville? See hyer, old hoss! ther 'lone hand' is far from bein' played out, though ther keards tremble a little ere they fall! I'm a hoss from ther Rio Grande—a rattler from ther borders ov ther Staked Plains. Though more'n half dead, I'm a death-trap with a hair trigger. See!"

The last word was followed by the downward sweep of the bowie, and almost simultaneously the hand of the Death Spider tossed a part of the rope up into the opening where it lodged far beyond reach of human hand!

A mad cry—a fierce oath—rattled from Calumet Tom's throat, and his forward spring was checked by the sudden lifting of Centipede's revolver—so sudden that the muzzle almost touched Calumet's face when he halted.

"Not another step, or I'll empty yer head!" hoarsely hissed the Texan, his eyeballs glaring like the orbs of a wolf over the leveled weapon.

"Calumet Tom, ye stand on ther borders ov thet unseen land from which no man ever comes back. Ye ar' at ther mercy ov a devil who, it is said, never spared an enemy, an' now, with a bowie wound in ther vicinity of his heart, d'yer think he'll know compassion? No; yer didn't deal thet blow, Calumet; but ther man who did wants what ye'r after—ther girl! No! look inter my eyes an' see resistance thar. By ther eternal gods, Calumet Tom, I owe ye nothin'—nothin' but ther ball thet lurks above my finger."

The man from Leadville was at the mercy of the Texan. He saw the dark finger that touched the trigger but a few inches away, and he knew that his life hung by a very slender thread.

"Take a step back an' disarm!" suddenly continued the Death Spider. "You want ter see Lucy. Very well; you kin wait fer her hyer."

"Hyar?" echoed Calumet Tom.

"Why not? I hev ther girl's oath thet she will come back."

"From whar?"

"From Bullet Bar."

A singular smile flitted suddenly over Calumet Tom's face.

"I know what you think," said Centipede Sam. "I war a fool fer trustin' ther girl thet far—eh, Tom?"

"Perhaps."

"We'll see. Back an' disarm!"

Sullenly Calumet Tom obeyed. He was covered by the merciless revolver of the desperado sport, and he knew that a failure to obey would cost him his life.

He drew his revolvers and threw them forward, to see them land at the Texan's feet, then his bowie followed, and he stood unarmed before the man who had made the cavern an ingenious trap.

"Now," said Centipede Sam, smiling, "we'll wait fer ther Queen ov Leadville."

He picked up the revolvers, saw that they were not cocked, and tossed them, with the knife, into the dark recesses of the chamber, then he leaned against one of the walls in a restful attitude, and looked at the discomfited tracker.

"Hang it all! if this isn't a pickle in strong brine, whip me for a Digger!" growled Calumet Tom to himself, reflecting on the strange turn of fortune's wheel. "I had better hev gone with Pawnee an' Denver Duke ter Bullet Bar, hadn't I? But ef Lucy comes hyer, what's ther difference? I had ther call on Centipede Sam a short time ago, an' now he's got ther same on me! Sich is life, Calumet. Free ter-day, kivered an' cornered to-morrer!"

Silent for some moments, the two men eyed one another with an interest impossible to describe.

"Oh, Hades! This is worse nor death!" suddenly cried Calumet Tom, starting forward. "Let's fight ter see who waits alone for Lucy! Throw me one ov my weepens—I don't keer which, Centipede. This is torture."

"No," said the Death Spider, calmly, and in a tantalizing manner. "We both wait for Lucy ov Leadville."

"Ye'r afraid! Coward! you dare not face Calumet Tom with yer own choice ov weepens!"

A spasm of madness seemed to darken the Texan's face, but he said with a laugh:

"You can't insult this Texas Spider inter a fight, Calumet Tom. We both wait hyer for Leadville Lucy!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PARDS FOR AN HOUR.

"MEBBE Jerusalem Jake didn't s'arch deep enough fer ther dockermments. His hand might hev overlooked 'em. I'm goin' back. I can't afford ter lose 'em this way."

Gilded George, who had left the pards of Bullet Bar with Lucy in their possession, turned back on the outskirts of the camp, and walked toward the cabin where he had lately turned from the dead body of Bloss.

He could not believe that some one had entered and abstracted the valuable papers which he had taken from Centipede Sam at the risk of his life.

He had always believed that Bloss's story of the theft was a cunning fiction, and, as we know, had told Don Frisco that he would find them concealed in Bloss's bosom. He was confident of this, but when he saw Jerusalem Jake search the body of the dead and find them not, he was both nonplused and astonished.

"Give me ther dockermments, an' I'll wade through blood ter my boot-tops ter ther gold bonanza!" he continued. "Let me get my fingers on 'em—then, wildcats, look out! Bloss knew 'em ther moment he sot eyes on 'em; he called 'em ther Cleburne bonanza, an', ef I recollect right, it's a dandy piece o' fortune."

The desperado of Bullet Bar pushed open the door of Bloss's shanty and glided inside. The lamp was still burning over the stiffened form of Bloss stretched out on the floor, and Gilded George went to work at once.

He searched the dead man thoroughly, turned his pockets inside out, ran his bronzed hand into his bosom, and examined every square inch of his jacket.

Nothing!

Then the cabin came in for a search, and not a space of the smallest dimensions was overlooked.

"They must be somewhar. He had 'em," ejaculated the fortune-hunter. "Thet story ov thet war a wind game, calkerlated ter hoodwink me. I'll hev them dockermments ef I hev ter rake Hades with a fine-tooth comb!"

But the longer Gilded George searched, the further off seemed the bonanza, which only a few hours before he held in his hands. The cabin seemed determined to yield up nothing, and the silver sport glanced more than once madly at the dead man, lying in the weird lamplight, with staring eyes and terrible of countenance.

"Nothin' hyer!" grated Gilded George. "Say, old pard, why don't yer give a feller a clew?" as he wheeled upon the dead. "Tell me whar ther key ter ther Cleburne bonanza is! Don't go back on yer old pard, Bloss. By Heavens! I wouldn't go back on you! Thet's not Gilded George's style, an' nobody knew it better than Bloss o' Bullet Bar!"

The night-wind creaking the door was the only answer ther ruffian got.

"Thunders! I'll find 'em in spite of 'em all!" he cried, as he sprung erect. "Bullet Bar kin plant yer, Bloss. When I get ther bonanza I'll give yer a stun thet'll set our mountain grave-

yard off in style. Ther pards won't hang ther girl. I know thet. She must be saved ez well ez ther dockermments; but ther dockermments first!"

He went to the door, opened it and passed out. By this time Lucy had been acquitted by Jerusalem Jake's casting vote, and Denver Duke and Pawnee had taken her from the assembled population of the silver bar.

Gilded George walked toward Jerusalem Jake's cabin where he expected to find the girl, and pushing the door open suddenly he entered.

"Whar's yer prisoner, Jerusalem?" he asked of the big fellow who rose from a table as he stepped inside.

"Gone!—waltzed off by two friends jest arter we hed acquitted 'er."

Gilded George looked amazed.

"Gone?" he ejaculated.

"Gone!"

"Tell me."

Jerusalem Jake did so.

"Jake, I kin trust you. Thar's a bonanza somewhar an' not far off, either. Ther papers yer looked fer in Bloss's bosom ar' ther key ter it. With them an' thet girl, we kin become two bonanza kings, an' live at ther top notch ov fortune till we're scooped by death's ace. Jerusalem, did yer ever hear o' ther Cleburne fortune?"

Jerusalem Jake sprung forward at the risk of overturning the table, and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Whar did you get onter thet?" he cried.

"Never mind whar—I got thar," said Gilded George mysteriously. "Answer my question. You've heard ov it?"

"Who hezn't thet ever saw Californy?" was the reply. "I knew Gin'ral Cleburne. I war on his estate when he died."

"Eh?—you!" exclaimed Gilded George.

"I war."

"Then, you know thet he had two children?"

"They allus said so, but nobody ever saw 'em."

He used ter say thet a woman he married in Mexico gave him a boy an' a girl—thet he hed marked 'em both on ther shoulder with ther letter 'C.' What d'yer know about it, Gilded?"

"First, yer hand," said Gilded George. "I go slow in matters like these. What's the bonanza worth?"

"By this time it hez thribled its value."

"A million?"

"More than that."

George of Bullet Bar gave a long, low whistle.

"Shall it be an even divide, Jerusalem?" he asked, looking into the eyes of his companion.

"Yes."

"All right. Now, ther lost dockermments ar' the Cleburne will an' proofs ov ther child's identity. Heaven knows how they fell inter ther hands o' ther man I got 'em from. Ther girl ye've jest let go is ther heiress."

"Heavens, no!"

"Fact!"

Jerusalem Jake stood before Gilded George like a person struck dumb with amazement.

"An' I let 'er go?" he hissed. "Why didn't I know it afore? Thet girl ther Mexican wife's child? My God! I could shoot myself."

"Don't do thet, Jerusalem," said Gilded George, with a grin. "It might interfere with our gettin' hold o' ther bonanza. Ther girl an' ther last dockermments—we must find 'em all."

"Which first?"

"Ther papers."

"I say ther girl," said Jake. "Don't yer see, Gilded, thet ther girl with ther mark on her shoulders is enough? Thet'll prove her a Cleburne. They all know ther will in Sacramento: it's been published a dozen times in as many years. Give me ther girl, an' the dockermments kin go ter Satan!"

"I want 'em both."

"Ef we can't get one key, we must take ther other."

"What d'yer propose?"

"This—ter shoot Lucy out o' ther hands o' ther two men who took 'er from us a while ago."

"Which way did they go?"

"I know. Ar' yer ready, Gilded George?"

"I'm always ready fer bizness when a bonanza lies at ther ends o' my fingers."

Jerusalem Jake had no preparations to make; he merely extinguished the lamp that rested on a rough shelf above his head, and turning to his companion said, sententiously:

"Come—ter ther trail!"

They walked out together, and Jerusalem Jake looked up at the heavens.

"We must be quick," he said. "Mornin' ain't a thousand miles away. Let ther boys plant Bloss."

Twenty minutes later two men stood in a dark pass' more than a mile from Bullet Bar, with a wall of creeper-covered rock on either hand.

"Hist! Gilded, thar it goes ag'in!" suddenly ejaculated one of the couple in a whisper.

"You heard it thet time?"

"Not a word—not a sound. Yer ears ar' better ner mine of ye heard anything, Jerusalem. Ter me ther bonanza is as far off now as when we left Bullet Bar."

"Wait fer me hyer—five minutes."

"I will."

Gilded George saw his companion glide away and leaned against the wall to await his return. The moments passed slowly to the big sport;

he saw the stars of morning drop down the trails of the sky, but no sound announced Jerusalem Jake's return.

"What ef he hez deserted me?" passed suddenly through Gilded George's mind. "What ef Jerusalem considers ther bonanza too small ter divide?"

At that moment the figure of a man was creeping snake-like over Gilded George's head.

Not a sound gave forth his movements, and the coil of rope that he dragged at his side broke no mountain twigs. He was creeping along the edge of the mountain wall against which Gilded George leaned and about twenty feet above that worthy's head.

"When a man hears ov a bonanza these times he must keep it ter himself," muttered the creeper. "Bullet Bar is ther last place on earth ter share a scheme ez big ez yers, Gilded George, an' I'm ther last poverty-stricken seraph ter listen ter a divide in a case like this."

Whether Jerusalem Jake had heard a noise or not, he was hunting the place where he had left Gilded George of Bullet Bar.

Inch by inch he crept along the brink of the wall, his eyes on the alert, and his hands ready for the work he had allotted to them.

All at once he stopped and saw directly under him a man leaning against the wall.

"The fool waits yet!" parted his lips. "I didn't think ye war so easily hoodwinked, Gilded. I guess I'll be ther bonanza king an' play thet role in Sacramento all alone. Never mind, George ov Bullet Bar, I'll get ther girl, an', of necessary, ther dockermments; but with ther girl alone I'll fight my way ter ther stakes worth playin' for."

With the coolness of the practiced desperado, he uncoiled the rope, and leaned over the wall with a noose in his hand. It was poised directly over Gilded George's head, and was held there by the hand of the big rough, while his eye measured distance, and took in the man's position.

"Good-by, Gilded. I'll play ther game out alone!" he said in low tones.

Then the black noose dropped suddenly downward fell like a ring of death over the head of the man by the wall!

"Great God!" cried Gilded George, springing away as the infernal cord tightened about his neck. "What devilish trap is this I've got inter?"

Jerusalem Jake had leaped to his feet and started back.

"Trap?" he echoed. "This is ther trap thet wins all ther bonanza fer Jerusalem!"

The man below tried to tear the lasso from his neck, but he found himself jerked from the trail and as his senses whirled, and the light of the few stars faded out, he was hanging along the wall with the lasso wrapped around a tree above.

"Ther slickest trick, an' ther best one ov my hull career!" said Jerusalem Jake, gliding forward and leaning over the brink of the wall.

"Some things ar' almighty big, George, but yet they're too durned small fer two! I war taught when a boy in ther gold lands ov Shasta, ter win all games at any hazard. Hang thar. When ye git yer fingers on girl or dockermments, Gilded George, let Jerusalem Jake know by mail."

He looked down and saw the rope stretched tight; he saw, too, the human body that hung along the wall, and watched it for a moment with eyes full of desperate victory.

"Gilded divided his secret with ther wrong daisy," he said. "He didn't hev ter; he warn't obliged ter take me in pardnership in thet bonanza. He must hev wanted ter open ther gates o' eternity. Farewell, George. Yer's in a grave 'twixt star an' trail; mind—"

"There's no trick in saying whar it'll be!" said a stern, coarse voice.

Jerusalem Jake leaped up and whirled with a revolver half drawn and cocked.

"Stand whar you are!" continued the same voice. "You are right, Jerusalem Jake—the California bonanza is too small for two men. I'm of thet opinion myself. You've got somebody hangin' at the end of yer rope. I'll know who it is when I have sent you to the path whar you lassoed him. You don't know me, eh?"

"No," said Jerusalem Jake.

"Well, I'm Don Frisco, late of the Leadville-Denver trail, an' I hold now the dockermments that are the key to the Cleburne gold mine!"

Jerusalem Jake uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"Ha! I thought I would astonish you," the Cut-purse of Colorado went on. "The reason the papers warn't found on Bloss's corpse is thet I carry them myself. Whar do you want the death messenger, Jerusalem?"

The lips of the desperado of Bullet Bar met firmly, and seemed to lose their color.

"Oh, I'm going ter kill you!" continued Don Frisco, mercilessly. "I leave no pitfalls in my way. I am going to the fortune, you know."

"Without givin' me a chance?"

"Without givin' you a solitary show for life! If you won't say whar you want the bullet, I'll say myself."

That was all. The next second the air was rent by the report of a revolver, and the man on the edge of the wall threw up his hands and disappeared.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FOUND!

THE partnership entered into between Gilded George and Jerusalem Jake had come to a sudden and terrible end. It was like many another one in the land where man, like nature, is wild.

Don Frisco walked to the edge of the wall and looked down. Daylight was breaking, and the first streaks of morning were just appearing among the mountains.

"Both out of my way, thanks to the man I dropped, and his lasso," he said. "Some men seem born to luck, and I guess I am one of them. I'll go back now an' take up the trail that must lead me to Centipede Sam."

He turned from the spot and walked away. As he moved on the light increased until the trees, the rocks and the little patches of mountain grass were visible.

The Cut-purse of Colorado was going back to the spot where, on the previous night, he had turned from Centipede Sam's trail, to go back to Bullet Bar, there to find the important papers on Bloss's person.

This time he was more successful. A drop of blood here and there, the same ones which had not escaped Calumet Tom's keen eyes, rewarded his search, and he followed them with the persistence of a bloodhound. For a long interval there would be no stains, then one dried drop would show on the trail, telling Don Frisco in mute language that he was on the trail of the Death Spider of Texas, and his traitor.

There was something thrilling in the spectacle of that lone man going up the mountain, following the blood-trail of a human being. He wanted to find Centipede Sam; he knew he had been terribly wounded by Gilded George in the fight for the documents that fixed the identity of Leadville Lucy, and he expected to find the girl with him.

The reader knows there was a time when the Cut-purse of Colorado hunted Centipede Sam merely to punish him for playing the "lone hand;" but now he had another thing in view. Don Frisco wanted to lay his hand on the prize which had lured the Death Spider of Texas from his oath; the Cleburne bonanza interested him as much as it had the men who had died for it within the past forty-eight hours.

Meanwhile, the men of Bullet Bar were not idle. The information conveyed to Denver Duke by Pawnee when the Denver sport had taken Lucy from Jerusalem Jake and his pard, meant trouble ahead. The men who voted against the girl's acquittal because they wanted to avenge Bloss were determined to show more than their teeth.

The rescue of Lucy by the Denverite and his Indian pard, was enough to infuriate them, and the determination to shoot the girl from her protectors was applauded whenever mentioned.

The eleven roughs in favor of conviction had adjourned to a certain cabin, and there over copious draughts of the vilest liquor that ever crossed the mountain to burn human throats, they swore that Leadville Lucy should pay terribly for the work of her pistol.

Jerusalem Jake was not present to counsel moderation. If he had been, he would have been laughed down if not hustled unceremoniously from the cabin, for the eleven were resolved not to be balked again by the voice of one man.

Morning, coming rapidly on, found the roughs in the mood to become the most merciless human-hunters ever known. They swore a final oath, and throwing open the door of the shanty, rushed out, eager for the chase.

The presence of Denver Duke and Pawnee at Bullet Bar perplexed and astonished all. Some were certain that the two rescuers had horses near, and declared that they were then far away, but others said that their actions indicated that they were not alone, that the men of Bullet Bar would have to face more friends of the girl than just two pards—an Indian and his friend.

If Don Frisco had turned a few moments from his blood-trail, he might have seen the men who left the silver camp pitted against the fair girl for whom he sought at the end of the crimson path. He saw them not, however, and they entered the mountains, following the trail traversed only a short time before by Lucy and her rescuers, and with the rosy light of morning in their faces.

If the Bullet Bar desperadoes had followed the trail long, they would have found a blackened corpse dangling from a lasso along a wall of solid rock and a dead man lying across the trail near by. But they turned off suddenly some distance from this scene, guided into another path where here and there was seen the print of a dainty foot in the dust between the walls of the trail. Gilded George and Jerusalem Jake had missed this trail in the night.

The Bullet Bar pards pushed along rapidly, eager as hyenas to come up with the human quarry.

No longer was heard the name of Bloss coupled with the threats that fell frequently from their lips. They thought only of Denver Duke and his pard, and they swore to shoot the girl—the Queen of Leadville—out of their hands.

Their last theory of a camp somewhere among

the mountains near Bullet Bar was the correct one. In a cosy place under a lot of huge rocks poised, as it seemed, alongside the mountain were the three persons so eagerly hunted by the eleven desperadoes.

Denver Duke and Pawnee had taken Lucy straight to the camp where the horses had found grass and where they had agreed to wait for Calumet Tom in case they got there and found him not.

The trail leading to this camp was narrow and capable of being defended with ease by one man, and Denver Duke in pointing out this advantage to the girl had taken occasion to assure her with a laugh that all Bullet Bar could not take her away.

"And so yer promised to go back to Centipede Sam in the cavern?" asked the Denver sport while he and the girl sat in the midst of the camp under the overhanging rocks.

"I did and I ought to," was the answer. "Desperate as he is, Duke, that man knows much about my history. Heaven knows how he discovered that Victor was my brother, and how he knew that he was on his road to me with those important papers. He calls all his shrewdness his 'lone hand.' I shudder when I imagine him throttling Victor with his long fingers as he surely did, and I always remember that I swore to take the life of the man who committed that devilish deed."

"No; let a man do that," said Denver Duke. "He attempted my life the night I got to Leadville. He tumbled me forward in Colonel Starbottle's hotel, you know, but my escape was not his fault. The door glass saved me. Let a man avenge Victor, Lucy—let Denver Duke do it."

"You?" exclaimed the girl, looking up into the young sport's face.

"Why not? Let me do it and say, 'By Leadville Lucy's best friend.'"

"But you cannot find the cavern now."

"You reached Bullet Bar straight from it?"

"Yes; but in coming up here we have taken a different trail. All this region is strange to me. I never saw it before."

"Pawnee will find the mountain cavern. That Indian never loses anything. I believe he could find a pearl lost in a forest."

"Do you know who he is?" asked the girl, glancing down the trail and catching a glimpse of a motionless figure which from her position looked like a statue planted among the mountains.

"No; nobody does. Calumet Tom knows more about him than any living white man, and I believe he knows but little. They have been friends and pards these many years, and some link seems to unite them. I once thought that he was not an Indian."

"Not a red-man?" exclaimed Lucy, surprised.

"I do not know. It is merely conjecture," said Denver Duke, with a smile. "I never asked Calumet Tom, and if I had, I might have gotten no information for my pains. I will set this restless Indian on the trail of Centipede Sam, and that without delay. He will find the cavern and its Death Spider, and we—"

One, two, three shots rung out on the morning air, and broke the Denverite's sentence.

He went forward with an ejaculation of astonishment on his lips.

The figure down the trail was seen in motion.

"By Heavens! they've opened on Pawnee!" cried Denver Duke. "Somehow or other they have stolen a march on the red lynx. They have hit him!"

Drawing his revolvers, the Denver sport went forward. He knew that the pards of Bullet Bar were upon them, and when he saw the Indian, evidently hit, turn, straighten and throw forward his weapons, he knew that the danger was imminent.

Before Denver Duke could reach Pawnee, the red-skin's revolvers flashed in the faces of a number of men who had leaped into the trail and were pushing forward, believing that their shots had given the Indian his death-wounds.

At each shot a big white man dropped out of sight, and the Indian's eyes lit up with the light of vengeance.

He seemed to know that his companion was coming down the trail behind him.

"Drop all the dogs you see!" cried Denver Duke. "It is three against the silver camp. We hold the prize we've captured with our best blood."

He reached the Indian's side just as the pards of Bullet Bar disappeared, thus escaping Pawnee's deadly aim, and the eyes of the two friends met.

"Many down thar?" said Pawnee.

"Yes—I know—the men who voted for Lucy's death last night!" was the answer.

Pawnee glued his lips together, and glared down the trail.

"They stole a march on you, Pawnee," said Denver Duke, looking at him.

"For once in the Indian's life," was the reply, in tones of the deepest chagrin. "They got Pawnee's blood, too."

The Denver sport saw the Indian waver as he spoke; a spasm of pain seemed to flit across his face.

"Back to the girl," said Pawnee resolutely. "We plant our feet where the Leadville lily is."

With their faces to the attacking party, still unseen, Denver Duke and the Indian moved slowly up the trail.

"Hello! thar!" suddenly called a loud voice, and the pards saw a burly silver rough step into the trail with a handkerchief, not very white, clutched between thumb and finger.

A growl parted the Indian's lips, and his right hand was up in an instant.

"Don't shoot him," cried Denver Duke, seizing Pawnee's wrist. "Hear what the silver desperado has to say."

Then the young Denverite threw himself in front of the enraged red-skin.

"We're ten ter two!" shouted the rough with the handkerchief. "This is ther Bullet Bar kentry, an' we ar' ther boss cherubs ov ther diggin's. We make no long parley. We give yer three minutes in which ter surrender. Remember! we promise nothin'. You invaded ther Bar last night; you took away a violator of our laws. By ther eternal God! we're hyer fer vengeance. We want ther girl who shot Bloss in cold blood."

The voice of the rough died away, but he did not move.

"Ten against two it shall be," said Denver Duke. "We have met men in regions as famous as Bullet Bar. The girl is behind us. We stand before her while life flows through our veins."

"All right," said the man. "Ther sun, when it sets, may leave ther buzzards a picnic!"

"That I will not dispute. The only question is whose bones shall the wild birds pick?"

The man dropped his handkerchief and sprung aside, disappearing in an instant.

"Come," said Denver Duke to Pawnee. "We go back to defend the Queen of Leadville to the death. She's worth fighting for."

The Indian's eyes glistened as he clinched his hands, and the two pards went up the trail together.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LEADVILLE TO THE RESCUE.

"Why wait hyer till we turn to stone eying one another? The girl will never come; she has deceived you, Centipede Sam. She got her liberty. Come, throw Calumet Tom a weep on of some kind, ef yer want ter fight, an' let us settle matters forever."

"Not yet. I still hold that lone hand which hez never failed me. You don't get Centipede Sam ter fight a man who is not winged. We wait hyer fer Leadville Lucy. Hev patience, Calumet."

The two speakers still stood face to face where we left them last in the cavern to which Calumet Tom had tracked the Death Spider, who had been waiting for Lucy's return from Bullet Bar.

The night had passed away, but there were no signs of the change in the cavern; the fire, still burning on the stone floor, gave out that night still remained.

Impatience seemed to devour Calumet Tom, and more than once he glared at his cool guard with the eyes of a tiger and seemed about to leap across the cave at his throat, despite the revolver ready to kill him at the slightest attempt.

"Hang mo fer a boss-thief ef this isn't gallin'!" groaned the old Leadviller. "Hyar I am, cooped up in a cave an' kivered, while Duke an' Pawnee may need help at ther Bar! Kivered by a winged vulture, too. I've been in 'pickles afore, but never in such sharp brine ez this. You must git out o' it, Tom."

Calumet Tom looked across the space that separated him from the cool desperado, and tried to mature a plan of escape.

Centipede Sam leaned against the wall and watched him with eyes that seemed to twinkle over his victory.

"Yer won't fight, Sam?" asked the old miner.

"Not till Lucy comes back," was the reply.

"Then, prepare ter die in yer tracks, for ther girl will never come. A bird let out o' its cage, never comes back."

A derisive smile came to the Texan's lips.

"We'll wait for ther one bird anyhow," he said, tauntingly.

"Not another minute longer!" grated Calumet Tom, and the next instant he threw himself across the space and straight at the man whose hand clutched a six-shooter!

"Oh, I'm a jumpin' cyclone when I git started!" he shouted. "You won't fight, ch, Centipede? Then, by the eternal hills! I'll do it all myself!"

The Death Spider was agile and eager; he threw up his revolver, but the spring of the Leadviller was too quick even for him.

Calumet Tom's bound carried him across the space, and he had clutched and thrust down the arm of the rough before the revolver could be brought to bear against him.

"Goin' ter wait fer Lucy, eh? Wal, ye'll wait alone!" he went on as he looked down into the face of Centipede Sam. "How's yer lone hand now, Spider? Ain't thar a bare possibility thet it'll fail ter win this time?"

The answer was an oath hissed out from behind clinched teeth and the Texan found himself borne down along the cave wall to the floor of the cavern with the fingers of Calumet Tom behind his windpipe, and the eyes of the old miner flashing like balls of fire.

"I never lost a play yet, Centipede, an' I'm too old ter begin ther losin' business now. When ye choked her crazy ye did Don Frisco a favor, for ye kept her from his track."

Centipede Sam, weakened by the wound inflicted by Gilded George, was no match for Calumet Tom. The old traitor forced him against the floor and held him there with his bronzed fingers at his throat.

"Wait for Lucy?—wait till doomsday!" ejaculated Tom, rising suddenly with an unconscious man lying at his feet, and recovering his weapons. "I'll bet my boots, thet I'll see ther girl afore you set eyes on her ag'in, Centipede. Cheat this galoot out o' another glimpse ov the Queen of Leadville ef ye kin."

He turned to the hole in the roof of the cave and found it beyond his reach. Centipede Sam had thrown the cut lasso into the darkness above, thus preventing Tom from using it as a means of escape.

But the old fellow was resolved not to remain there long. He searched the cave for a rock to be used as a stepping-stone but found none; the walls were smooth and the floor clean. All at once, however, he came across the piece of rope which contained the noose. Picking it up with an ejaculation of delight, he stood once more under the opening and began to throw the noose into it with the hope of reaching the rope above and bringing it down to him.

For some time the trials were unproductive of results, and Calumet Tom let slip many ejaculations of anger. Having freed himself from Centipede Sam, fate seemed to have set its face against him once more.

Fifty times, at least, he threw the rope up into the darkness overhead.

At last a cry of triumph broke over his lips; another rope came down with his own.

"Success at last!" cried the old miner. "Now we'll see what victory awaits us under ther stars. All aboard for Denver and Pawnee!"

Calumet Tom seized the dangling rope and tested its strength, then drew himself up, and with an effort reached the edge of the opening above. The rest of the attempt was not difficult, and a minute later the old fellow had drawn his body from the cavern and could glance down at the Texan lying insensible at the foot of the wall with the flickering firelight on his face.

"When we want him we'll know whar ter find 'im," ejaculated Calumet Tom. "Good-by, Centipede! Thar'll be some elevated cussin' when mem'ry comes back."

Ten minutes later the miner stood beyond the cavern and in a trail thoroughly revealed by the morning light.

"Ef Denver an' Pawnee war successful, I'll find 'em in camp," he said, starting off. "I found Centipede Sam; now we'll see ef they raked in Leadville Lucy."

Calumet Tom started toward the camp under the rocks on the mountain-side, but had not covered one-half the distance between it and the cavern, when several shots saluted his ears. The old man stopped in an instant.

A brief interval followed and then as many more reports rung out clearly on the morning air. "Su'thin's up!" he cried, drawing his revolvers, and starting toward the reports. "I'll stake my boots thet them revolvers ain't far from ther girl. Thar's more lone hands than one in these diggin's. I'll see who's playin' ther one down thar."

The quick shots were enough to guide the Leadviller to the right spot, and he was soon flying down the trail like a man running for his life. With a cocked revolver in each hand and fire in his eyes, Calumet Tom carried himself forward with great bounds, breaking through bushes here and leaping bowlders there.

Suddenly he came to a halt and crouched.

"Pretty much ez I 'spected," he said in low tones. "Ther pards ov Bullet Bar hev taken a hand in ther game thet opened in Leadville more'n a month ago. Eight they ar', but by heavens! eight they won't be ef I take a hand!"

The speaker leaned over a huge rock, and looking downward beheld eight stalwart men grouped together and throwing fierce glances up the narrow trail that crept gradually up the sloping side of the mountain.

A short distance from them lay three figures human in shape and still.

"Thar war eleven when they got hyer—I see through it all," said Calumet Tom, eyeing the three recumbent figures for a moment. "Those pards thar got their final dose ov lead an' ar' sleeping in their boots on ther mountain trail. Now, let ther eight move."

Calumet Tom crept forward to another rock some few yards nearer the pards of Bullet Bar, and looked down upon them with eyes full of eagerness.

"Jest proceed ter renew ther battle, my silver-camp jimsons," he said. "Jest waltz forward ter tackle yer foes ag'in. I'm spillin' ter play a 'hand' thet makes my fingers itch."

At that juncture, as if to accommodate the man from Leadville, one of the eight faced his companions and exclaimed:

"Thar's but two ov 'em! Shall it be said thet eight pards of Bullet Bar lacked out from a fight with ther odds in their favor? We came hyer ter shoot ther mountain daisy from ther

pards' hands. She's in 'em yet, an', what is more, three ov our pards went down afore ther dropper ov thet infernal Injun!"

Exclamations of rage followed the rough's harangue, and Calumet Tom saw one and all spring to the ascending trail.

Softly and without noise, the old miner slid over the rock and dropped into the narrow path.

"I guess it's about time for Leadville ter take a hand in this game," he said.

A long stride carried him forward, then he planted himself firmly in the trail and threw up his hands.

"Halt, thar!" rung over his lips. "Do me ther favor, pards ov Bullet Bar, ter stand in ther trail!"

Before he had reached the conclusion of his last sentence the eight roughs faced him and were gazing with amazement into his face.

"Warn't lookin' for this specimen ov humanity, eh?" came over the leveled pistols. "Thought I warn't on *terra firma*, I s'pose. Ain't yer between two fires, my dusky angels?"

The men from Bullet Bar seemed too astonished to get a word out. True, they clutched their revolvers, and even partially raised them, but the heavy weapons that grinned at them from the hands of Calumet Tom kept their fingers from the triggers.

"Gents, throw yer droppers over yer heads—twenty feet back of yer—quick!" continued the Leadviller.

"Hang me, if I will!" growled one. "No livin' man ever disarmed Antelope Abe."

"Didn't, eh? I'll prove yer a liar!" said Calumet, and at the ringing report of the revolver in his left hand the dissenter staggered back disarmed in a second by death!

It is needless to say that the other revolvers were thrown as Calumet Tom commanded, and a moment later there stood among the discarded weapons the figure of Denver Duke!

"These ar' lone hands thet discount Centipede's," said the old Leadviller. "Denver Duke stands between Bullet Bar an' Lucy. I see it in his eye. Thank Heaven!"

The seven pards now found themselves between the pistols of the Denver sport and the Leadville character. They glared from one to the other like cornered tigers awaiting their fate.

"Back to your camp," said Denver Duke.

"Leave the trail at your right, and go back!"

"Yes; this ar' a mountain game thet more'n eight men kin play at," said Calumet Tom.

"That is true," whispered a handsome man half-concealed by some bushes a few feet from the Leadviller. "A game, Calumet Tom, which I will win at last!"

The Bullet Bar pards did not consult long; the terrible argument of the revolvers was enough, and vowing vengeance, they turned aside and walked sullenly away.

Calumet Tom had escaped from Centipede Sam in the nick of time!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE AVENGING TRIGGER.

LEADVILLE once more!

In the glare of the several lamps of Poker Phil's famous resort for the silver sports, sat a number of men who night after night frequented the place. The clock behind the bar told the hour to be exactly half-past eleven, and the games at the various tables were at their height.

Two days before a little party of four had ridden quietly into the city—three men and one woman—the latter very young and very beautiful, and by no means a stranger in Leadville.

In other words, and to be brief, reader, Leadville Lucy had come back, and the roughs of Bullet Bar were behind her. Behind, too, was the cavern with its lonely tenant, for when asked about Centipede Sam, Calumet Tom had said that he wasn't "worth lookin' arter," thus conveying the impression that he had left the Death Spider dead in his last web, and dead at the end of his last "lone game."

The Queen of Leadville had quietly taken possession of her old home with the clew to the big bonanza still unfound, for the documents which Centipede Sam had taken when he choked Victor to death in the stage were still lost.

"Never mind the papers, Lucy," laughed Denver Duke, the second night after the return to Leadville. "I've got a little bonanza of my own deep in the mountains about Denver."

"But my name?" cried the girl. "Who am I?"

"Lucy!—Queen Lucy, of Leadville."

"But that is not enough. I seemed on the verge of revealing my identity at one time. When I faced Bloss I was certain that I was about to make the discovery, but Gilded George stepped in between, and I failed. I am Lucy, you say—but Lucy who?"

The Denver sport laughed.

"We'll get at it, girl," he said soberly. "If Calumet Tom, Pawnee and I can't unravel that mystery, we'll sell out hyer and emigrate East."

"Keno Kate had the secret on her tongue's end one night. She was about to disclose it when Centipede Sam leaped through the window into my room and choked that poor woman into insanity. Now, she has left Leadville. Nobody cares whither she went, nor what becomes of her. You see the secret—the papers—

are lost forever! I shall remain Lucy of Leadville."

The Denverite said nothing for a moment.

"What if I should throw the papers at your feet?" he suddenly asked.

"Can you?" cried the girl, springing forward.

The sport's eyes seemed to glisten.

"Did I say so? No, Lucy, I have them not," he said. "I know not where they are. But I will bring them to you. This night I begin a hunt for the secret of your birth. I may go back to Bullet Bar—to the coast; but no difference. I know what Denver Duke's reward will be if he gives you those precious papers."

The eyes of the Queen of Leadville kindled with a light that made Denver Duke more than confident, and the next moment she was the sole occupant of the little room.

At that moment, or soon thereafter, a man with a very black beard and eyes of the same color, walked into Poker Phil's and sauntered up to the bar.

While he stood there talking to the proprietor of the place, his eyes wandered among the gamblers, then all at once became fixed on the masked portrait of Don Frisco behind the bottles.

"Thet's ther coolest cut-purse thet ever inhabited this paradise," said Poker Phil in an explanatory manner, seeing the visitor's glance.

"A reward for him, I see?"

"Wal, I should reckon. Thought we had 'im once, or at least thet old blow-hard, Major Butterball, thought so; but it warn't ther real Don Frisco—no, indeedy!"

"Whar does he hold forth now?" asked the black-whiskered stranger, carelessly.

"We don't know. He hezn't been gettin' his work in on ther Denver trail since Major Butterball hauled two ov his pards back dead in ther stage. Left kinder sudden—Don Frisco did. But we keep ther reward standin', an' ther picture up, too. Mebbe he'll come back an' give some Leadviller a chance ter rake in ther five hundred."

"The bonanza the major didn't get, eh?"

"Yes."

"What became of the major?"

"He's one ov ther useless but permanent fixtures ov this town. He keeps a whisky-ranch three doors below me, but nary a customer. We've boycotted ther fussy old sell."

"I b'lieve I'll drink with him."

"You? Don't! See hyer, stranger. He'd go inter convulsions ter see a customer at his bar. Don't! Fer Heaven's sake, don't kill ther ancient skunk with joy."

But Poker Phil's customer seemed determined. He took another drink and walked out.

"Boys, thet galoot's gone ter patronize Major Butterball," said Poker Phil, advancing upon the men at the gaming-tables.

"What's his name?" chorused a dozen sports.

"I'll never tell yer."

Down went fifty cards on several tables, and twenty men sprung up.

"We'll take in ther show!" they cried, and out they trooped.

Meanwhile, the man with the black beard had reached the "Happy Heart Saloon," presided over by the famous Major Butterball. Walking into the place, he had surprised the proprietor in the act of sampling his own wares with his broad shoulders to the door.

So absorbed was the major in pouring out the proper quantity of liquor that he did not hear his visitor's approach, and the first notice he had of his whereabouts was the hand that dropped lightly on his shoulder.

"Jehosaphat!" cried the major, wheeling about. "A livin' man, by ther holy tables! Say—hold on! Don't disturb my visitor. She's asleep," and the owner of the "Happy Heart Saloon" glanced across the room to a woman seated on a bench at one of the empty tables, with her head buried between her arms upon it.

The major's visitor followed the glance and then looked at the little proprietor.

"Asleep, eh?" he said.

"Yes. She came in hyer awhile ago, from ther mountains, I guess. First time I ever saw 'er, though her face looked familiar. She wanted ter trade a daisy revolver for a drink, but I said 'no.' She got what she wanted, though, without money, an' she walked over ter thet table thar, an' hezn't moved since."

"Maybe she's dead."

The speaker stepped toward the woman. His tread was soft, although he wore boots, and Major Butterball watched him closely.

Slowly he stooped over the woman who heard him not, and his finger fell gently upon her shoulder.

"Look up here, my gentle seraph. I—"

The touch, soft as it was, seemed to send a nameless thrill through the woman's frame, and before the sentence could be finished, she was on her feet.

"Great God! Keno Kate!"

The man sprung back as if a tiger had leaped suddenly into his path. A wild, senseless laugh rattled from the woman's throat.

"This is not earth where we meet once more!" she cried. "No! it must be Tartarus. You are not the thunderbolt that burned my throat. I know you. Why did you come back—Don Frisco?—to die?"

"Don Frisco—the devil!" ejaculated Major Butterball.

"I know him!" continued the woman, sending a swift glance toward the astonished man standing among his bottles. "Once I leaped over a cliff for him. Now, he leaps over one for Keno Kate."

Quick as the lifting of an arm, a revolver was thrust into the face of the major's visitor.

The men from Poker Phil's had just entered, and were staring at the thrilling tableau presented in the middle of the room.

"No murder hyer!" shouted the major, in appealing tones. "Don't let her shoot that man, gents! For Heaven's sake, mister, disarm that female! She's mad—ther whisky's gone ter her brain—"

"Look into Keno Kate's revolver, Don Frisco!" came over the leveled weapon without the least regard for Major Butterball and his frantic appeals. "Leadville may not know you in your disguise; but you haven't hid your eyes. Stand where you are, gentlemen. This Texas ruffian is at the mercy of the woman he wronged—the woman he made his tool, and crown Queen of Keno among the devils of the Southwest. Mad am I? Who would not be when hunted by that villain for five years? At last, Don Frisco! At last!"

The last word was followed by the sharp crack of the woman's revolver, and before the flash the man threw up his hands, spun half-way around, and fell at the feet of the thunderstruck spectators!

Nobody seemed to breathe for several minutes.

"Take off that black beard, gentlemen, and compare the face with the portraits of Don Frisco that hang in your saloons. *That is the man!*"

She walked forward, looked down into the dead face for a moment, and then with compressed lips, but with flashing eyes, went coolly out.

"The fate that brought him to Leadville brought me here also," she said.

Yes, it must have been fate.

Leadville had no rest that night.

Stripped of his dark beard, which was an artificial one, the handsome dead man was known to be the Cut-purse of Colorado!

He had come back to Leadville on the heels of Lucy and her friends for a purpose. Everybody said so, but what was it?

"Search that man before burial," said the voice of a man who gazed at the corpse.

It was done, and lo! in his bosom was found a package of papers which the man who had suggested the search snatched from the hands of the finder!

"Look! Calumet—Pawnee!" he said, turning to two spectators. "Lucy's name and fortune! Heaven—not fate—sent Don Frisco to Leadville with these prizes!"

Search was made for Keno Kate, but she was not found.

"By Jehosaphat! I'll apologize to thet woman when I find her," said Calumet Tom. "I once took an oath for her to hunt Don Frisco down, but circumstances forced me ter break it. Thet's why she wouldn't hev anything ter do with me ther first night she came ter Leadville. For killin' thet kid-gloved cut-purse, I'll apologize ter Keno Kate."

But he never did.

Quietly the woman had come back to Leadville, and as quietly had she disappeared. If the mountains had buried her, she was none the less lost to her hunters.

With the papers in her hands, Leadville Lucy became Lucy Cleburne, and while the lost estate did not run up into the millions, it was sufficient to enrich her, and not long after the ending of Don Frisco's career, she became the bride of Denver Duke.

Calumet Tom, who still inhabits Leadville, has never told the truth of Centipede Sam's fate. He left him choked, not dead, in the cavern, and long since in terrible agony died the infamous Death Spider of Texas, whose last "lone hand" was the most fatal one he ever played. How he knew that Victor Cleburne was Lucy's brother, and when he was to travel the Denver trail in the Daisy Gem stage, will never be solved, but that he knew it, and that he was aware of the value of Victor's valise, the events of our story have attested.

He played his "lone hand" out, but death was the reward—the final stake of the desperate mountain game.

Pawnee—"the Indian in buckskin"—suddenly disappeared from Leadville soon after Don Frisco's doom, leaving behind him much discussion about his identity. Calumet Tom refused to talk about it, and there are some who believe that the two were brothers.

Major Butterball—"the majah, sah"—closed his saloon after the death-shot and went back to Denver where he is still to be found.

Bullet Bar still exists, and one of its late discoveries was that Bloss died from a bowie-wound in the heart, and not from Lucy's pistol, showing that Frisco, when he robbed him of the documents, took also his life.

Keno Kate, avenged and mad, is missing still, and Lucy, the bride, is happy in the proudest home of the Golden State.

THE END.

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